

TREK
ENCORE
THREE

trek encore

3

STORIES & POETRY

BY

GINNA LACROIX



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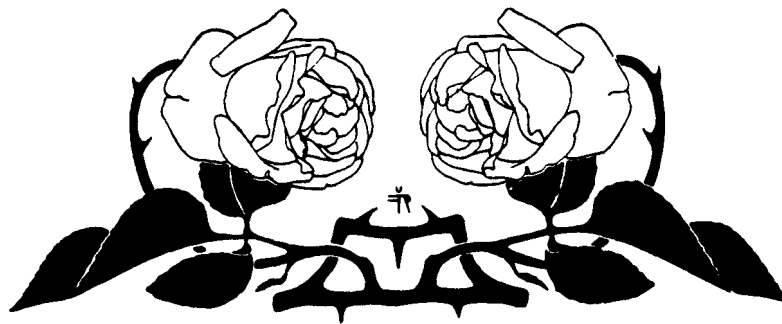
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1975 was the year I discovered that I was not alone in my appreciation of an old science fiction series called STAR TREK. With the publication of STAR TREK LIVES and the NEW VOYAGES anthologies that year, I was incurably infected and knew I just had to find more of this nifty fan fiction. Easier said than done -- my first queries were met with, "Sorry, that zine's out of print." It took more than a year of searching and scrounging before I finally hooked into the publishing network (remember, those were the days before DATAZINE and UNIVERSAL TRANSLATOR -- all I had to work with was a very out-of-date STAR TREK WELCOMMITTEE DIRECTORY). I soon began to notice several authors who stood out head and shoulders above the rest -- and Ginna LaCroix was one of them; her name on a story assured a most pleasurable read. And thanks to long-time collectors such as Sandra Gent and Ruth Breisinger, who allowed me to borrow their zines by the double armload, I was able to soak up many of Ginna's out-of-print stories. All along I thought it a shame that such a rich oeuvre was not available to all fans -- and thus was born the concept of TREK ENCORE (originally simply ENCORE, but a Mel Gibson anthology beat us to that title).

Little did we at IN CASE OF EMERGENCY PRESS realize what a task we had undertaken! Pat Friedman has served yeoman duty at her computer, feeding it each and every page of these three volumes -- she had no inkling of the work ahead when she innocently volunteered to "do some typing" for us. And Marie Wallick has been invaluable by giving us access to her mint condition collection of vintage zines -- and thanks are owed to all the other San Diego readers who dove into closets and attics searching their collections for us. Usually proofreading is a real chore, but in this case it was a genuine pleasure to read and reread these stories. Thanks also to Kim Knapp and Julie Cabler for their share of time in proofing -- which was gauged not by the number of pages, but by the inches of thickness ("I'll have the last 3" back to you tomorrow").

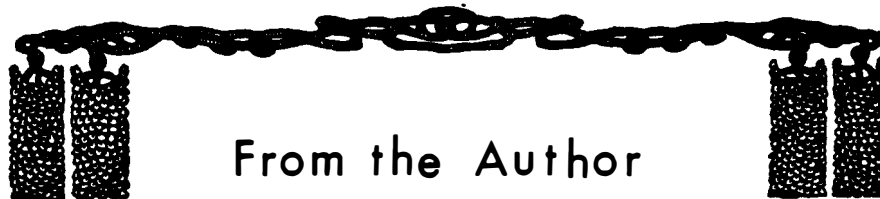
We must also express our gratitude to the editors who have granted permission for reprinting many of the stories and poetry in this collection. Further ahead is a list of those editors who are still actively publishing, including their zines which are still in progress.

If fan reception to the concept of TREK ENCORE is encouraging, we hope to amass other retrospectives of fan writers. We welcome recommendations from our readership of writers they would like to see reprised in this manner.

Happy reading,

Vel Jaeger
EDITOR





From the Author

A word from the author? Yipes, I've never written a word unless I've been hiding behind Kirk and Spock!

Like everyone who writes, there are a few people who must take most of the credit. First — Carol Frisbie, for taking the time to patiently explain to a first time writer why, in "Invasion"¹ she couldn't destroy every starship in the Fleet — and for always pushing for better stories. Second, — Merle Decker. You all know her artwork, and so much of it has made my stories better than they are. Who can forget her illo in "Reckoning"¹ of a dying Kirk held in Spock's arms. A non-Trek friend said of it that she had never seen such love expressed in a drawing, and I agree. Merle's name should also be on "Truths"³ — a story we hashed out on a midnight drive back from New York and who gave its first editing comment — "It's got a beginning and an ending, but you forgot the middle!" Third — Ruth Breisinger — for being there. Lastly to all the nutty editors who take on the agony of producing the zines in which our works are printed. Without you, we wouldn't be — and think of how much money we would have saved!!

I've suggested a small history of some of the stories. I seem to write differently from most people, having no preconceived idea before starting of what I'm going to write about. The only concrete idea is a "hurt" (mostly for Kirk — he is so beautiful when he is dirty, bloody, and exhausted — my Spock tends to sit there stoically and say, "There is no pain ...") or a "quote." That's why I can't get past the short story format. I don't know what's going to happen either. I get so involved as I scribble along that I can't stand it any more and finish so I can find out what happens! I'm afraid I'm never going to write the great American novel. For example, "Safe Haven"² was supposed to be a happy shore leave story, but when I discovered men plotting against poor Kirk on page one, I knew I had failed.

"The Human Tear"² arrived out of a humn book found at the National Cathedral. "Breaking Point"² was originally a very long farce, written when Carol Frisbie complained no one was writing hurt/comfort any more. At that time its title was "I Don't Feel Very Good" or "I Assure You, Doctor, I Am Perfectly All Right" or "Why Won't Anyone Ever Listen To Me." In it everybody got hurt. The story also received the best editing comment I've ever had: "It has to be shortened by about twelve pages, but don't take anything out!" "The Christmas Tree"² was written during Hurricane David, which won me the "Landru Award for illogic" at the Volkers' New Year's Eve party.

I often write to relieve my frustrations. After blowing a piston rod through the engine of my car one Christmas, did I get mad? No, I sat down and made Kirk a drug addict in "Images."³ "The Outsider"² turned up when everybody else went off to a convention and I had to stay home and work.

Everyone has their favorite story and their own reasons for it, just as I'm sure most writers secretly dislike much of what they have done. I'm no different. I have a very special place in my heart for "Breach"¹ a story written years ago with probably more emotion than anything else I've done. Even now, it stands the test of time and I still love it. I hope each of you finds something of equal value in the following pages, and enjoy reading it as much as I have writing it....

§ § §

1= TREK ENCORE ONE 2= TREK ENCORE TWO 3= TREK ENCORE THREE



STORIES & POETRY BY GINNA LACROIX

§ = still in print, or periodically reprinted

¶ = yet to be published

£ = unpublished

All others currently out of print

INVASION .. Rigel 3

FABRIC OF SPACE .. Rigel 3

"Musings" -- Rigel 3

BECAUSE OF YOU — Millenium 1

ONLY HUMAN — Berengaria 9

§ ONE GOOD TURN — Galactic Discourse 2

SAFE HAVEN — Guardian 2

THE HUMAN TEAR — Stardate Unknown 5

WE DO OUR BEST — Fantasia 2

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED — Log Entries 11

BUT UP TO NOW — Contact 5

WHEN SOMEONE UNDERSTANDS — Nexus 1

BREACH — Turbolift Review 1

THE OUTSIDER — Contact 8

TRIPTYCH — Rigel 4

ALL THINGS HEAL IN TIME — Turbolift Review 2

"One" — Maine(ly) Trek 1

"Epilogue" -- Maine(ly) Trek 1

A PRIVATE LITTLE HELL — Rigel 4

RUNNING UP AND DOWN ON GREEN GRASS -- Nexus 3

LIEBESTOD — Thrust

§ DEJA VU — Final Frontier 1

§ THE BEGINNING — Nome 1

§ RECKONING -- Galactic Discourse 3

"Because of You, I Am" -- Vault of Tomorrow 1

"Gem" -- Star Canticle 3

DREAMERS NEVER LIE — Nexus 5

§ DISCOVERY — Nome 2

BREAKING POINT — Sun and Shadow

THE MOURNER — Sun and Shadow

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER — Trek Continuum 1

THE ANSWER — Maine(ly) Trek 2

"No Longer Brothers" — The Shatner File

£ THE PRICE

§ CONUNDRUM — Galactic Discourse 4

"The Flight" — EnterComm 3

RETURNING HOME — Millenium 4

THE PARTING — Nome 4

¶ PRELUDE — Maine(ly) Trek 4

£ NEGATIVE PON FARR

THE PREY — Gateway 1

IMAGES — Contact 7

TRUTHS — EnterComm 5

(Approximately in order written)

THE DREAM — Alpha Continuum 3

THE SUN IS NO FRIEND OF THE DEAD — Nome 5

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER — Vault of Tomorrow 6

REALITY — Kirk

WE WERE ALL THE SAME AGE ... ONCE — Kirk

"Legends — and Men" — Kirk

§ PRICE OF ACCEPTANCE — Gateway 2

¶ ON THE WAY TO THE SKY — Before the Glory

"As I Stand Here" — Vault of Tomorrow 4

§ A TIME TO CARE — Galactic Discourse 4

WHEN THERE ARE NO ANSWERS — Nome 6

THE HOTTEST FIRE — Vault of Tomorrow 4

§ "Remember" — Galactic Discourse 4

§ Perfection" — TREKISM at Length 3

§ REVERSE IMAGE — TREKISM at Length 3

§ CATHARSIS — Matter/Antimatter 3/4

INSANE — CERTIFIABLE — Hooker 1

"Only One Like Him" — Hooker 1

"Alone" — Hooker 1

£ TENDERFEET

§ COLORS — Matter/Antimatter 3/4

A COMMON BOND — Nome 7

¶ A DIFFERENT REALITY — Kaleidoscope

¶ "The Two" -- Kaleidoscope

¶ "The Reason" — Kaleidoscope

§ GHINATOWN 1965 — Hooker 2

§ TWO DIMENSIONAL THINKING 1

¶ THE TURNING POINT — Contact 9

¶ "The Reasons" — Contact 9

§ A STRANGER MET — Vault of Tomorrow 8

§ "View of a Silver Lady" — Vault of Tomorrow 8

THE WARNING — Mind Meld 1

§ THE FIRST PAYMENT — Mind Meld 2

¶ WHAT IS LEFT — The Needs of the One

(or Galactic Discourse 5)

¶ "A Vulcan Lament" — "

¶ "The Empty Chair" — "

¶ "His Name Is ..." — Guardian 7

§ BEYOND TRUST — Progressions

¶ REVENGE — Mind Meld 3

Two Late" — Klee-et/Alpha

Reflections" — Klee-et/Alpha



Pluggola Page

BEFORE THE GLORY: still in progress; write to Syn Ferguson, 2209-A Monroe, Eugene OR 97405

THE COMPLETE RACK, by J. Emily Vance, reprint; \$10.75 ppd to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

CONTACT COLLECTED: VOLUME 1 - selections from CONTACT 1 & 2, \$11.80 ppd; VOLUME 2 - selections from CONTACT 3 & 4, \$16.05 ppd; CONTACT 9 - in progress, due late 1985; write to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

FINAL FRONTIER 1 & 2, Cynthia Drake; periodically reprinted; write to TIBERIUS PRESS, c/o Sandra Gent, 6472 Cascade St, San Diego CA 92122 AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED

GALACTIC DISCOURSE 1,2,3 periodically reprinted; GALACTIC DISCOURSE 4 still in print: \$14.75 FC, \$13.36 BK SP HD; GALACTIC DISCOURSE 5 & THE NEEDS OF THE ONE in progress; write to SATORI PRESS, Laurie Huff, 709A E. Bullock, Eureka IL 61530

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HOME IS THE HUNTER, a novel by B. Volker & Nancy Kippax; reprint, \$10.75 ppd; write to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

INTERSTAT - monthly letterzine, current Trek news; \$7/six issues: payable to INTERSTAT, c/o Teri Meyer, 13924 Jefferson Cir, Omaha NE 68137

KALEIDOSCOPE - features the roles of William Shatner; Vel Jaeger & Beth Carlson, eds; still in progress; file SASEs at WSF, PO Box 1366, Hollywood CA 90078

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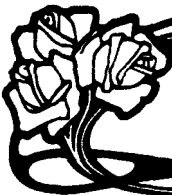
REUNION, a novel by Beth Carlson - \$10.50 FC, \$8.95 BK; write to IN CASE OF EMERGENCY PRESS, c/o Kim Knapp, 235 Pine Ave #Q, Carlsbad CA 92008

SOURDANI JOURNAL, a novel by Lynda K. Roper - \$8.50 FC; write to PO Box 4392, Arlington VA 22204

TREKISM AT LENGTH, edited by Vel Jaeger - #1 - \$5.00 FC, #2 - \$8.00 FC, #3 - \$16.75 FC, #4 - \$11.80 FC; #5 - in progress, due Fall/Winter '85; payable to TREKISM, c/o Kim Knapp, 235 Pine Ave, #Q, Carlsbad CA 92008

TWO-DIMENSIONAL THINKING - \$10.50 FC, \$9.50 BK INS; write to: Lee Heller, 27 Wilmot St, Watertown MA 02172

VAULT OF TOMORROW 8 - \$12 BK INS; write to: Marion McChesney, 3429 Cheston Ave, Baltimore MD 21211



Because of You. I Am

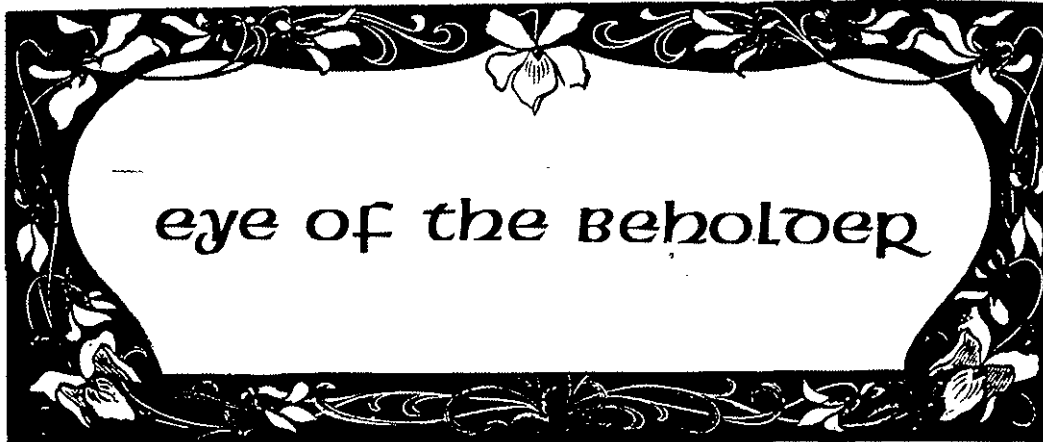


You lie sleeping at last,
Tossled hair and outstretched arms
Underlining your youth.
You are young,
How easy it is to forget that fact
Since so many depend so much on your strength.
You stir and I hold my breath
In fear of waking you.
You need sleep, you need time to heal
From this last terrible hurt.
Surely you have been hurt more than duty requires,
This last time worst of all.
You toss your blankets in your restless moves,
I stand and pick them off the floor,
Waiting until you are peaceful before replacing them.
I see you now as I did that first time so long ago.
You came with him,
And for a brief moment, I thought that Mitchell was you
Since he looked older, wiser,
And, yes, more serious.
It was then that I saw the braid
And lifted hidden, astonished eyes to your face
And saw what I had first missed...
Confidence, authority, ability
Behind the boyish mask.
I found you hard to understand,
I knew you were trying to understand me,
Making no judgment,
And attempting to accept me as I was...
And failing.
I made you angry for telling the truth
Since Mitchell was your friend.
But the ship was your responsibility
And for that, he had to die,
And he died by your hand.
I had seen humans hurt before
And had not let their emotions touch my mind.
But I was there when you beamed aboard,
You said only, "Gary's dead."
But your heart was crying and I felt your anguish.

That was the first time I had ever tried to reach another
 When I said I felt for him too.
 And you seemed to understand.
 It stayed like that for a time,
 Then you were forced to meet yourself
 In a way few men ever would.
 And I knew
 Even as I stood by the massive engines
 And watched you face your double,
 I saw in your eyes the unbelieving look
 That is often mirrored in my soul.
 I tried to warn you,
 To help you understand what you were facing,
 And the pain it brought
 Forcing you to face the truth hurt.
 But you trusted me,
 And looked to me for support.
 No one had ever done that before.
 It was then that I knew I was needed,
 And your thanks covered a multitude of emotions.
 Your understanding of my warring sides
 Made existence easier after that,
 I found I did not have to fight myself so much,
 At times I could let myself become what I was,
 Not what I was trying so desperately to be.
 I think your full understanding came
 On Tantalus V,
 In that room...
 Alone.
 The words were spoken:
 "It's hard to believe a man could die of loneliness."
 I felt a cold grip at my heart as I heard your answer:
 "Not when you've sat in that room."
 I thought no one else could ever know that aloneness.
 I almost reached out then,
 Almost broke my rigid rule of never touching,
 Almost exposed myself for others to see,
 But then you looked at me
 And your eyes let me know that you understood now,
 And that we would never be alone again.
 I almost smiled, the relief was so great,
 But when I turned away, unable to give in to my human half,
 You understood.
 "Leave any bigotry in your quarters,
 There's no room for it on the bridge!"
 Silence echoed as everyone carefully kept his attention on his work.
 You committed yourself then,
 You had reached out your hand to me and now everyone knew it.
 You weren't afraid to say I was your friend,
 And you dared anyone who abused it.
 I couldn't answer,
 No one had ever cared before...
 Until you.
 That friendship had led us far,
 And held us together during times when by ourselves

The crushing burdens would have proved too much.
 They tried to destroy you over Finney,
 They almost succeeded.
 I felt my world crashing down along with yours,
 Yet we proved them wrong.
 How hard I fought to protect you from the pain the Guardian had inflicted.
 "Don't love her, Jim, she has to die!"
 I knew you weren't hitting out at me as we waited for the time.
 You were trying to accept my warnings
 As I tried to make the knowledge of her death easier to bear.
 But I didn't...and it wasn't.
 That is one time I failed.
 And barely had you time to heal from that when your brother also died.
 The pressures were building within
 And I did nothing but complicate the matter.
 You were forced to manage by yourself.
 For that I blame myself.
 McCoy's words still ring in my ears:
 "Get your hands off him, Spock. He's dead!"
 And your face swam into my vision,
 The ahn moon wound round your neck,
 My guilty hand still holding it...
 And you.
 I wanted to die then, and I knew I would.
 "Live long and prosper, Spock," she said.
 I cringed at the words..both she and I knew it would not happen.
 "I will do neither. I have killed my Captain and my friend."
 The word was out and I saw the look in T'Pol's eyes.
 "Art thee Vulcan, or art thee human?" she had asked,
 And now I had given her my answer.
 I have never forgiven myself for what I did,
 But it made me face my feelings,
 And understand them,
 And accept.
 And you kept reaching out, trying to understand,
 Yet accepting when I could not come half way.
 "Captain, Ambassador Sarek and his wife are my parents."
 You almost managed to conceal your surprise,
 And asked no questions.
 For that I was grateful.
 Then you almost gave your life for them.
 I should not have let you take command,
 McCoy told me after just how badly hurt you really were,
 But you shrugged it off with a grin when I tried to thank you.
 Then I turned around and hurt you so badly when you were old.
 "You are no longer in command of this ship!"
 You were justified in throwing me out...
 I did betray you.
 I rarely ever told you about my feelings,
 Words are often so inadequate,
 But you needed assurance and I was the only one who could help.
 "A ship runs on loyalty...to one man,
 And nothing can replace it, or him."
 I had made my choice, but was it a choice?
 Man...or machine,

Jin...we need you,
I need you.
You are not Kirok, you are James T. Kirk,
And your wife and child are dead.
I brought you that knowledge,
All I could do was be there
And let you know by my presence that you were not alone.
Time heals,
But memories are hard to erase.
"Captain, we must get off this bridge!"
Your strong hands clutched painfully at my arms
As you struggled with your devil.
Your faith in me allowed you to understand and regain control.
I can still feel your hand on my shoulder,
And your words, "my Vulcan friend."
From that moment on it did not matter what happened,
For those words, so often heard
Were finally expressed alone to me.
And, because of that, I tried to help,
Although to take away a memory is wrong.
I knew you loved her,
Yet it was a reaction
To the yet unhealed loss of your recent hurt...
Mirimane and her child.
You would never have forgiven your part in her death.
Her innocent love for you would be
A memory you would not have been able to bear,
So I let you
Forget.
But there is nothing I can do to protect you from this.
What hell must you have passed through
Before my mind reached out and discovered you in her.
I understand you well enough to know
You would never have accepted what she had forced you to become.
Some things are more alien than others,
But this most of all.
She stripped you of yourself,
Made you something you could never be.
"I never meant to hurt her," you said.
For what she had done to you
You could still say that!
I answered that we understood,
But we never can,
Nor can we forgive.
So now you lie here,
Sleep restlessly fighting the horror of reality...
You will heal, my friend,
Together we shall face more unknowns,
More dangers, more horrors,
And because we are together
They will be possible to face,
And accept.
Because of you...I am.



Lt. Commander Leonard McCoy was in a towering rage. Never in his life had he been as angry, as blindly hating as he was now. All the weeks of gut tearing sorrow hidden under the professional guise had let rip and he exploded, lashing out at the one person left who had shared with him something - someone - very precious. But that priceless someone was no longer there, there was nothing left of that tenuous thread which had once stretched from him to the Vulcan through that common bond. That delicate link had stretched back again as long as that special entity stood as the focal point.

From the moment he declared James T. Kirk dead, Spock had withdrawn. He had instantly become the Vulcan McCoy had seen when he had first been assigned to the *Enterprise*.

There was no emotion, no grief shown. The *Enterprise* had taken the body of her Captain back to Earth. Spock had attended the ceremonies almost as a detached observer who had better things to do but knew that these meaningless ceremonies required his attention.

The orders finally came through - Spock was to assume temporary command of the *Enterprise* until Starfleet had time to assign a new Captain. Kirk's death had been so swift, so sudden, so unexpected at such an early age that Command had no one waiting in the wings. Spock had accepted his orders with no comment - he almost seemed to expect them.

McCoy watched him as he struggled with his own grief, as the rest of the *Enterprise* crew struggled with theirs, all somehow hoping it was only a grisly nightmare from which they would somehow awake - only they never would.

Never once did Spock mention Kirk. Never once did he go near his quarters. During his duty hours he was coldly efficient, outwardly unaffected by what had happened. The ship ran smoothly under his direction but the crew reacted by habit, not by loyalty. Whatever spark of magic that had flowed while Kirk was in command was gone. Spock did not comment on it, nor did he do anything to try to inspire the crew to turn to him. He ran his ship as an automated machine. There was no life in his command.

The more McCoy watched him, the more concerned he was in spite of himself. Spock desperately needed to talk to someone but his aloof manner now kept him far away from everyone on the *Enterprise*. Only with Kirk had Spock ever allowed himself to relax, to share his life. And because of his shared friendship and knowing how much Kirk had loved Spock, McCoy felt responsible for this cold, silent man. He knew he didn't count Spock as a friend - it was only because of their shared passion for one James T. Kirk that their paths had ever crossed. With him gone, those paths had quickly parted.

//Jim would try to do something for him,// eased McCoy from the depths of the brandy bottle that had been seeing him through the evening as it had seen him through so many evenings over the past weeks. Scotty had his scotch, Chekov his vodka, and McCoy his brandy - three drowning men clinging to a last remnant of hope in a meaningless world.

Spock was standing in front of the food processor waiting for his meal. As far as McCoy could tell, he only went through the motions - except for a small amount of plum soup, the Vulcan had not eaten since the *Enterprise* had left Earth.

//Damn stupid way for a commanding officer to act,// thought McCoy as he picked up his glass and bottle and cut through the room, arriving at the small table at the same instant as Spock.

"I'm joining you."

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly but he made no comment. They sat, McCoy refilling his glass and Spock toying

with his soup.

"Well, are you going to eat it or build castles with it?"

Cold, dark eyes surveyed McCoy with distaste. "You, Doctor, are drunk."

"Not yet, Spock, but I do intend on being so before the evening is out."

"Then, Doctor, I suggest you say what you have come to say before you let your mental faculties go altogether."

McCoy felt his anger rise but he refused to give in. Jim would want him to look after this cold machine of a person.

"Spock, you've got to let go."

If it were possible, Spock's eyes grew colder. "From watching you, Doctor, I was under the impression you were doing just that for the benefit of the entire crew."

They stared at each other with dislike.

"You're a man, Spock. You have lost probably the only person you will ever know who loved you and accepted you. Grief is a reaction, something to be shed by a friend for a friend..."

There was no flicker of betrayal on the face, but the brown eyes darkened slightly and the voice was deeper when he answered. "What I shared with the Captain I shared with him alone, Doctor. He is no longer a factor in my life. I am Captain of the *Enterprise* and as such am your commanding officer. Your relationship with me is as a medical officer, not a poking, prying fool who uses his medical degree as a cattle prod looking for tiny cracks in another man's life. There was a time I didn't object because a friend asked me not to. As your commanding officer I am ordering you to leave me alone or be ready to explain to the Surgeon General's Office and Starfleet Command why you are deliberately interfering with the smooth functioning of a starship. You would get transferred out of here so..."

It was then that McCoy exploded. All the weeks of tension tore loose years of simmering frustrations and hurts. All those times he had watched Kirk turn to Spock, counting on him, needing him, giving so much, asking so little.

Spock sat silent as McCoy threw all the hurt the Vulcan had piled on Kirk - deserting the ship for Leila, almost killing Kirk on Vulcan, helping Stocker take the *Enterprise* out from under him, all the times he had withdrawn when Kirk needed a friend.

By the time he had finished tears of pain and loss, of frustration and anger, were running down McCoy's face. Spock waited to make sure he had finished, then glanced over to where Chekov and Scotty were sitting in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Mr. Scott, I believe the doctor is in need of assistance to get to his quarters. I would appreciate it if you would accompany him there."

Scotty was on his feet in an instant. Chekov got up uncertainly, then followed the other two men out of the room. Spock watched them go, then glanced down at the knife he had been holding in his hand, the knife that was bent double and covered with green blood. He straightened it out and staunched the flow of blood from the palm of his hand.

Scotty juggled McCoy to his quarters in silence. He didn't know what had started the tirade but he was close to tears himself. He keenly felt Kirk's loss and privately he grieved for the young friend and commander. When on duty he somehow remained the same friendly, efficient person, father figure to his engineering section, and it took all the strength he possessed to pull it off. He got McCoy onto the bed, then leaned back against the partition, rubbing his hand across his wet eyes.

"Damn it, Scotty, why can't he feel? Jim valued him so much, loved him, needed him. Why can't he mourn his loss?"

"Spock's not like us, Doctor, you know that better than anyone. Grief's not his way."

"He's human, Scotty, a lot more human than he'll admit. I've seen it, you've seen it..."

"Doctor, I've known Spock a long time. It strikes me he's first and last a Vulcan. Like any of us when we're hurt, he's retreating - he's returning to his Vulcan training. What was it he said to you that day? 'We've disposed of emotion...' Maybe that's the only way he can deal with his grief..."

"He's too cold to have grief..."

"That's not fair, Doctor. Give him a chance..."

"Hell, now you're starting to sound like Kirk. How many chances can one man have? How many excuses will people give him before they finally face up to what an emotional cripple he really is?"

Scotty stood looking at McCoy for a few minutes, knowing that anything he said would be refuted. McCoy's bitterness would not be denied.

"I've got to go. You sure you'll be all right?"

A small smile crossed McCoy's face. "Yeah, thanks, Scotty. I'm sorry I blasted you. Spock just gets me riled up so easily."

"Aye, well, take it easy..."

McCoy sat staring at the closed door thinking about what Scotty had said. Was he really being unfair to Spock? Was he really that different? Then he shook his head. Next to Kirk he felt he understood Spock better than anyone else - and he was a cold efficient machine.



Had McCoy seen Spock, he would have instantly changed his mind. Alone in his quarters, his door locked against the prying outer world, Spock sat in huddled misery on his bed, his thin shoulders shaking as the soundless sobs racked his body.

Somehow, until tonight, he had kept control. Somehow he had made it through the terrible shock of Kirk's death, the long journey to Earth and the emotion charged ceremonies that that planet had accorded him. By calling on every ounce of Vulcan control he had made it. When the orders came from Starfleet that he take temporary command, he had almost refused but could not think of any excuse which would be accepted, so had accepted the assignment.

Each day was painful memory. The ship - Kirk's ship - so familiar, so alien now that he was gone. Around every corner he expected to see Kirk, everytime the turbolift doors opened he expected him to step out. Every moment of every day brought memories of him, reminders of him. Every moment of every day made it harder to accept his loss. By rigidly holding on, by desperately trying to do none of the things he had shared with Kirk, by visiting few of the places where his memory remained strong, Spock had managed to function in a very limited way. He knew none of the crew understood what he was doing, what he was going through. Many of them turned away from him now, unable to forgive the cold acceptance that the Vulcan had accorded Kirk's death. And until tonight it hadn't bothered him.

Tonight McCoy had broken him. The hurt and agony of his words had ripped open the fragile casing of Spock's feelings and the grief flooded through. He could do nothing to control it. The tears flowed endlessly, the raw emotions of his combined Vulcan/Human heritage were free at last.

"Hey, Mister, don't you think that's enough?"

Spock froze in mid-sob, not quite believing his ears, the voice echoing around the room, the all-too-familiar voice.

Taking a slightly hiccuping breath, Spock berated himself in a low voice. "That's what you get, you half-human freak, for letting your emotions run away with you. Now you're hallucinating. Great thing for a commanding officer to do. Delight McCoy to no end if he finds out. Come on, get a grip on yourself!"

Dragging a blue sleeve across his eyes, he slowly stood up.

"Don't you think you should get that hand attended to? That's a pretty nasty looking cut."

The voice was as clear as a bell and most definitely belonged to James T. Kirk. Spock turned around and looked into the next room, looked at Kirk who was sitting on the edge of the desk, a slight smile on his face.

"You could probably get M'Benga if you don't want Bones to look at it..."

Spock stood frozen to the spot, his eyes slowly traveling the length of Kirk's body, then back to his face, back to the concerned hazel eyes. For an eternity they locked gazes, then finally Spock spoke.

"Strain often creates illusion..."

The smile faded from Kirk's face. "If that's what you wish."

"That's what has to be."

Kirk nodded and stood up. "Nonetheless, Spock, that hand needs to be treated."

Spock looked down at his hand, at the still gaping slash left by the knife. When he looked up again, he was alone.



When Spock walked into the Sickbay, all signs of emotion had been cleared off his face. He was shaken by what had happened, shaken by the apparent desperate turn his emotions had taken him and determined not to let it happen again. He had seen humans occasionally react like this under stress, but he was a Vulcan...

"Do you need something, Mr. Spock?"

He almost jumped at Nurse Chapel's voice. He had been so engrossed he had not heard her come in.

"I have injured my hand and have damaged some nerves leading to the extremities. I would like Dr. M'Benga to look at it."

If Christine thought his request for McCoy's assistant an unusual one, she said nothing. Within a short while M'Benga was working on the injury. When he finished he put an aircast over Spock's hand.

"I want to keep it immobilized for forty-eight hours, Mr. Spock, to give that nerve graft a good chance to take hold. I'm afraid you'll have to make do with your left hand."

"Only a minor inconvenience, Doctor, Vulcans are ambidextrous." Spock walked out leaving M'Benga shaking his head. Spock always had an answer for everything.

Briefing Room 6 was empty as Spock had hoped. He sat at the opposite end of the table from where Kirk always sat and activated the computer. He asked for all information concerning stress and its complications, especially concerning hallucinations. It took a long time to get through the different complications and their patterns. Finally Spock leaned back in his chair, his question still not answered to his satisfaction.

"Frustrating, isn't it?"

Spock's head snapped up. Kirk was sitting in his usual place, hands folded, eyes gravely fixed on his First Officer.

"Glad to see you did something about your hand, though. M'Benga?"

Spock nodded slowly.

"You've been fighting with McCoy, haven't you?"

Spock got to his feet. "This is ridiculous, I cannot sit here and talk with an hallucination!"

"Spock, you've got to talk with someone..."

Brown eyes held familiar hazel ones, so full of understanding and compassion.

"No! No, you're not really here!" Spock almost ran out of the briefing room, colliding with a couple of crewmen who were walking past. They looked after his swiftly retreating figure in astonishment, then into the empty briefing room, wondering what it was that the Vulcan was running from.

When Spock appeared on the bridge the next morning the strain was evident. No longer was he the cold commander. Now the brown eyes were haunted, the hand holding the report had more than a slight tremble, the shoulders were no longer ramrod straight. Chekov and Sulu exchanged glances and raised eyebrows. Uhura resisted a wild urge to put her arms around the suffering figure.

"Mr. Spock, we are approaching an interstellar dust cloud..."

"Sensor readings, Mr. Chekov. Mr. Sulu, seal enough to go around?"

"I doubt if it's worth it, Mr. Spock. It's shifting its mass at incredible speed."

"Mr. Spock, sensors show it's partially ionized. There could be instrument loss if we go through..."

"Opinion, Mr. Sulu?"

"There are no charted bodies in this sector, Mr. Spock. I don't see any reason to alter course. A nice straight line will take us through."

"I agree. Carry on, Mr. Sulu."

"Your screens should be up, Spock. It's not like you to take unnecessary risks."

Spock turned astonished eyes to Kirk who was standing beside the command chair. Uhura, turning in her chair to say something to him was silenced by the sight of the Vulcan staring at absolutely nothing. Perplexed, she glanced around but no one else was watching Spock.

"I agree a dust cloud presents no unusual danger but Chekov said there was ionization - that's unusual and unusual can spell danger..." Kirk's eyebrows rose in silent question.

Spock continued staring for several seconds, then just as Uhura finally opened her mouth to speak to him, he turned to Scotty. "Put shielding on exiure, Mr. Scott."

"Sir?" Scotty couldn't quite believe his ears.

"A precaution, Mr. Scott. We will not be able to see clearly and possibly will not be able to feel our way accurately. I, for one, do not want to bump into anything."

Scotty shook his head but his hand obeyed with no question. Uhura turned back to her board, her words unsaid, confusion strong in her mind.

The asteroid shower had been well hidden by the dust cloud. The ionized particles caused by the seashed rocks had the instruments registering only confusion. If their shields had not been up they would have been crushed. It was a shaken crew that emerged on the other side. The ship had received a pounding but the shields stopped any serious damage.

Spock slowly got to his feet. "Lt. Uhura, inform Starfleet of the location of that dust cloud and the danger of the concealed asteroid shower. Mr. Scott, you have the con. I shall be in my quarters if you should need me."

"Aye, sir."

Spock's hands tightened convulsively on the auto-handle as the turbolift doors started to close and he saw Kirk leaning against the railing watching him leave...



The red flame rose and fell, its flickering light all that disturbed the peaceful darkness. Spock had sat for hours, unseeing, his eyes never leaving the dancing point of light as he fought to control his ever-increasing terror, that terror only a Vulcan can know when threatened with the loss of that which was all important - the correct functioning of the mind.

He finally made his decision. Slowly he stood up and took off the soft robe, pulling on the familiar blue shirt. For a moment his hand traced the double stripe of his rank. Would that someday be two and a half rows of braid on a gold shirt? Would his life someday come to that or would he remain with two stripes on blue, with his loyalty transferred to yet another commanding officer?

The Sickbay doors slid open in front of him. He stopped in momentary confusion. He had not been aware of making the short journey from his quarters, even though he had intended to come here.

McCoy glanced up from where he was perched on the bed recalibrating one of the diagnostic panels. His surprise slowly changed to concern when he saw Spock standing as if frozen to the spot outside the door. Uhura had spoken to him of Spock's unusual reaction on the bridge and had also told him of Spock practically running over two crewmen outside Briefing Room 6.

Finally he hopped off the bed. "Well, Mr. Spock, are you going to come in or are you just going to continue letting that draft blast past you?"

Spock's face lost its look of confusion and he slowly walked into the Sickbay. McCoy saw the signs of strain, the signs which had been missing before, and seiled inwardly. Now they were getting somewhere. Spock wasn't the superhuman he thought he was.

"Something I can do for you, Mr. Spock, besides offering an apology?"

"Apology, Doctor?" Spock seemed genuinely confused.

"For yelling at you the other night. I shouldn't have done it. One man's grief is not necessarily another man's... Spock, you look terrible!"

Spock's control was wavering, his pain open and obvious.

"Here, you'd better sit down."

McCoy guided the unresisting Vulcan to a chair. Spock sat grasping the edge of the chair as if it were the one concrete thing in his life. Finally his tormented eyes met McCoy's.

"Doctor, I have been having trouble sleeping, I keep experiencing..." He hesitated, not knowing how to say what had been happening. "...I keep seeing..."

McCoy waited but Spock drew a shuddering breath and didn't continue.

"What do you see, Spock?" he asked gently.

"I keep seeing 'things', things that aren't really there..."

"When you're sleeping?"

Spock nodded. "And when I am awake. Doctor, I am responsible for this ship. To be effective I need to have a clear mind. Do you have something that can help?"

"Exactly what do you see, Spock? Perhaps if I knew I would be able to help more effectively."

Spock looked at his hands which were gripping the chair so hard his knuckles were white. When he replied his voice was very low and unsteady. "What can't possibly be there."

McCoy looked at him oddly but Spock said nothing more. Sighing, he went into the next room and got out a small bottle full of blue pills.

"Here, these might help. Take two before you go to bed, two when you get up."

He stood looking thoughtfully at the spot where Spock had sat for a long time after the Vulcan had left. He had rarely seen Spock so agitated, so nervous. Could he be cracking under the strain? He'd better keep a close check on him. If the strain seemed any worse he would have to order a complete physical. Come and had better hurry up with their new Captain...



Spock's hand shook as he poured water into the glass. The pills lay on the table and he picked them up, looking at them uncertainly. A real Vulcan would not resort to such things, but then a real Vulcan would not be tormented by the visions he was having. His hand closed tight over the unwanted medication.

"Don't take it if you don't believe in it, Spock. You've said that to me often enough."

Spock whirled to see Kirk once again leaning against the desk. They faced each other in silence.

Finally Spock turned away. "You are not real. You are a hallucination of a shattered mind!"

"Is your mind really shattered, Mr. Spock?"

Slowly Spock put the pills down along with the glass of water and looked back at Kirk. "Are you real?"

A slight smile crossed Kirk's face. "That's open for discussion - I'm ready to abide by your decision."

"On the bridge today..."

"You were under unusual strain..."

"You were there..."

"If that's what you wish to believe."

"You were there when I left..."

"Was I?"

"Why am I the only one who sees you?"

"Maybe the others don't believe..."

Spock stiffened, then he turned away. "This is ridiculous - the Vulcan mind is well ordered, logical, not cluttered with the confused thoughts of humans..."

"Maybe that's why."

Spock stared at the red flame. Finally he turned. "You will always be here?"

Kirk nodded. "When you want me, need me, I'll be close by." He smiled at Spock's look of desperation. "Cheer up, Spock, look at the bright side - I could be McCoy!"



He woke up to find himself lying fully clothed on his bed. He rolled over stiffly and sat up. The glass of water was empty, the pills gone. He didn't remember taking them but he had just slept a solid eight hours for the first time since Kirk had died.

He got to his feet and undressed, then turned the sonics up high and stood under their stinging, cleansing power. He couldn't remember if he had been awake or asleep when he had talked to Kirk. As he scrubbed himself with a towel he looked at the container of pills McCoy had given him. After he dressed, he took two out of the bottle and downed them with a glass of water. He didn't want that particular vision arriving unannounced again.



"Your hand's healed very well, Mr. Spock. I'd try not to bang it for a few days, though, and be careful which way you point your knives from now on." Spock's withering glance just bounced off M'Benga. If interning on a Vulcan ward had not robbed him of his sense of humor, one half-Vulcan was certainly not about to.

McCoy came in as M'Benga was finishing up. He noted Spock's more relaxed figure with a clinical detachment. //No mental breakdown imminent, he thought with a stab of gratitude. No matter what his differences with the Vulcan, he didn't want to see him broken.

"Well, Mr. Spock, you're looking hale and hearty this morning. You manage to sleep all right last night?"

Spock stood up, a guarded look on his face. "Yes, thank you, Doctor."

"Make a pact with your devil, eh?"

A slight shudder passed through Spock. "I don't know, Doctor," he said in a very low voice. "I honestly don't know."

A look of surprise crossed McCoy's face as Spock turned to leave, to be replaced with puzzlement as he tried to make sense of what Spock had said.



As the days passed the crew visibly relaxed. Spock was slowly returning to the man they knew, not the cold stranger that had arrived with Kirk's death. He began to notice little things, to occasionally compliment a job well done, to inquire into problems, and to consult with department heads concerning areas under their command. When he was faced with a situation where he did not know what to do, he found himself asking how Kirk would have handled it. Usually he would remember but when he didn't the illusion that was Kirk would be there to remind him. At first Spock had been reluctant to follow any of the 'illusion's' suggestions until it was pointed out to him that it wouldn't hurt to try. So he had tried and it hadn't hurt. And the crew seemed grateful for the small things which to him seemed totally unnecessary.

"Glad to see you're off that terrible diet of ploweeek soup, Mr. Spock," said McCoy, putting his tray down. "Mind you, that stuff looks equally unappealing." Spock glanced at the fried chicken on McCoy's plate but said nothing.

"I was looking at the chess board earlier. That's quite a game you've got going with the computer."

"Unfortunately it will end in a draw, Doctor, since the computer's knowledge of chess equals my own."

"Ue, pity no one else on board can watch you."

"I can..."

Spock looked up startled to see Kirk standing behind McCoy.

"No, you can't..."

McCoy glanced up to see Spock looking at him incredulously. He chuckled. "You're darn tooting I can't, and

you can wipe that ridiculous look off your face because I'm not even going to try!"

Spock quickly looked down, fighting for control.

"Well, Spock, how about it? I've looked at the chess board, too, and I know I can beat the pants off you. I'll meet you in the rec room after dinner."

Spock looked up again but Kirk was gone.

"Spock, you'd better tackle your dinner. I don't know how you can swallow that stuff in the first place, but it must be even worse when it's cold and clammy..."



Kirk was waiting for him. Spock had almost convinced himself to go straight to his quarters, but couldn't resist taking a look as he passed the rec room.

"I'm all ready, Spock."

Spock looked around the room in desperation, but no one else was looking in his direction.

"Come on, Spock, just because you know I'm going to lick you is no reason to chicken out."

Reluctantly, Spock sat down. For the first few moves he squirmed uncomfortably as Kirk took his time with each piece, studying various moves, discarding those that wouldn't work. Gradually Spock's interest deepened until, as usual, he was grimly battling Kirk's astoundingly illogical approach, and losing.

Several hours passed before Spock finally leaned back and conceded defeat. The look of triumph in the hazel eyes brought forth the familiar crooked eyebrow.

"So you beat yourself, Spock!"

Spock jumped. He had not been aware of McCoy's presence. He looked at the doctor comfortably draped over the chair, his head resting on his arms which were propped up on the back of the chair.

"Not only beat yourself but kept up a rather grumpy one-sided conversation and practiced an until now unknown art of telekinesis..." McCoy's eyebrows quirked but there was no answer from Spock. "Well," said McCoy getting up, "I always maintained chess was for oddballs. 'Night Spock."

For a long time Spock stared at the chess board, then looked up at Kirk who was looking at him sympathetically.

"He wouldn't believe you, Spock."

"Perhaps not, Captain, but I believe at some point he is going to have to be told."

"Probably, but I wouldn't worry about it until the situation arises. You'd better get to bed. I'll tidy up here..."

"No, you don't! I have enough trouble on my hands now with you moving chess pieces around. It is bad enough to be accused of using telekinesis - I do not think I could explain things moving around by themselves when no one is in the room."

Kirk chuckled at Spock's aggrieved tone but he stood back and let the Vulcan set up the board.



Unknown to Spock, McCoy had stopped by the Sickbay and pulled the Vulcan's medical file. He read through it very carefully but he knew he would not find what he was looking for. Spock had no latent telekinetic power. He closed the file and sat staring into space.



Spock was in his quarters when the message came through from Starfleet. He was to continue in command until the end of the five year mission which was only months away. When the crew was reshuffled, the new Captain would take over. A great deal of thought had been given to the idea of awarding Spock the captaincy, but after careful review of his record, it was decided that he had too often gone against direct Starfleet orders. They didn't feel they could trust a ship and crew to him. However, if in the coming months he proved himself an extraordinary leader, they were willing to re-evaluate their position.

"Damned bureaucrats!"

Spock started. He had not realized that Kirk had been standing behind him.

"They can't see past the noses on their faces or the print in their books. They've got the best man in the Fleet right at their fingertips and they say he's not qualified!"

"Jim, I don't want to command..."

The hazel eyes softened. "Maybe you don't want command, Spock, but rejection still hurts."

Spock looked away, unable to meet those eyes which always saw the truth.

"Anyway, between the two of us we can run your new Captain ragged if he's a pain in the ass..."

"Jim!"

Kirk grinned. "All right, I know when I'm not wanted..."



After McCoy's experience with the chess game, he started watching Spock closely. Most times the Vulcan seemed rational enough, only occasionally did he find Spock talking to himself and only once did he see him using telekinesis. But that once involved three helpings of ice cream, all of which he threw at himself, all of which he managed to duck, and all of which plastered McCoy. He managed to let it pass although Spock was unable to give a coherent reason for what had occurred. It took all his willpower to hold his laughter as Kirk stood folded in hysteria at the sight of the multi-colored ice cream dripping down the enraged doctor.

Things finally came to a head when McCoy found Spock in earnest conversation with the corridor wall. He stood just at the edge of the corridor and listened in astonishment as Spock argued the imperative need of compiling data on the solar flares in sector 325. He apparently seemed to think the wall was answering since he would listen in silence before taking up the argument again.

Finally McCoy could take no more. "Mr. Spock, I'm relieving you of duty. Section 1070, paragraph C."

Spock shot an exasperated look at the wall before he turned to McCoy. "I assure you, Doctor, I am not suffering from either mental strain or collapse..."

"Report to the Sickbay first thing in the morning, Mr. Spock. In the meantime, tell Scotty he's running this thing." He turned on his heel and left, allowing Spock no argument.

"Tough luck, Spock. I think we've pushed him a little too far."

"He had to find out sometime, Jee."

"Yeah, but I somehow don't think he's going to believe you when you tell him."



McCoy ran every test in the book for everything possible and Spock passed them all with flying colors. McCoy watched in growing exasperation as test after test resulted in a normal reading. Psychologically, Spock was completely adjusted, highly intelligent, suffering from no neurosis or mental fatigue or strain.

"Daenit, Spock, a 'noreal' man does not talk to blank walls, throw things at himself, talk utter nonsense to those under his command, use telekinesis, have eyes in the back of his head so he can warn a man to get out of the way of a spear he couldn't have possibly seen. Spock, what the hell's going on?"

"Doctor, it is nothing dangerous and I think you would be just as happy if you did not know..."

"Now look - something's got to go into my log. I've officially relieved you of duty - I've got to have some logical reason so I can put you back in command again without one or both of us getting his ears pinned back."

Spock actually looked embarrassed.

"Spock, come on, what is it? What's going on?"

Spock got up and walked over to the large medical computer blinking on the wall. He stood staring at it for so long that McCoy was suddenly afraid he was going to talk to the computer instead of him.

Finally he turned. "Doctor, several weeks ago you lost your patience with what you felt was insensitivity on my part..."

McCoy nodded but said nothing.

"I am not an insensitive person - and neither are you, please remember that." He took a deep breath and continued. "These past weeks I have not been 'floating' objects around, nor have I been talking to walls. I have been talking with Captain Kirk, playing chess with him, running the ship with him..."

McCoy stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment. This was much worse than he had expected.

"I would not say he is alive in the sense that we know, Doctor," continued Spock thoughtfully, "but I can see him, I can talk with him, he has the ability to move things around - your being doused with ice cream proves that..."

"You're mad!" said McCoy with quiet conviction. "You're absolutely crazy!"

"Is that what your tests say?"

"To hell with tests, I don't need tests to know you've cracked!"

"Starfleet Command will request your proof. All the tests you just ran state I am in perfect health, mentally and physically..."

"Tests can be wrong."

"You would admit that your tests were wrong?" asked Spock, both eyebrows on the rise. "I shall be on the bridge if you need me, Doctor." Spock left McCoy spluttering and returned to duty.



Spock knew McCoy was watching him, waiting for the moment when he could officially certify him as mentally unfit for duty. It was all he could do to prevent Kirk's crazy sense of humor from landing him in more hot water. He tried to be more careful in his dealings with Kirk, but there were still times when he would be caught talking to a wall or grabbing a chair which had been floating across the room or having to retrieve his tricorder out of a tree

when McCoy swore he had seen him put it on a rock.

Finally McCoy went to M'Benga in desperation to see if he could shed any light on Spock's strange behavior. M'Benga listened in silence while McCoy told him what he had observed, what Spock had told him, and what the results of the tests had been.

When McCoy had finished, M'Benga drew in a deep breath. "Spock isn't lying to you. Whatever it is that is happening to him, he honestly believes he is seeing and talking with Captain Kirk..."

"Is he going mad?"

"Maybe, but what is the definition of madness? Certainly a 'mad' Vulcan is different from a 'mad' human. I doubt very much if he would be unfit for duty. Has this affected his efficiency?"

"No, if anything he is more effective now than he was for those first weeks after Kirk's death. He's more like he was when Kirk was in command."

"This is bad?"

"You're missing the point, damnit! He's living with hallucinations, illusions..."

"Which are making his life easier to bear, making him more efficient in his work. What's wrong with that?"

"M'Benga!"

"All right, all right, I'll check up on him."

Spock didn't seem surprised when M'Benga called him to Sickbay and proceeded to run all the tests that McCoy had run a few weeks before. He wasn't as open in his answers as he had been to McCoy and never actually acknowledged that he had been seeing Kirk. But all his tests were again normal, his answers thoughtful and rational. Finally M'Benga let him go and took his results to McCoy.

"Normal in every aspect. I wouldn't worry about him. After all, we only have a few more months until our tour of duty is done. If he's still behaving oddly we can get a Vulcan healer to check him out at the base hospital."

"Doesn't seem a very good solution," said McCoy, frustrated in his inability to pin Spock down.

"Sorry, that's the best I can offer."



The *Enterprise* had just entered the area of space which was claimed by both the Klingons and the Gorns. The Gorns had an uneasy alliance with the Federation, pounded out after months of meetings started after the *Enterprise's* first contact with the Gorns on Cestus III. It was becoming more important as the Klingons were attempting to enlarge their Empire, to take over new planets for conquest and expand areas where they could live. Because of the increased hostilities, both the *Enterprise* and the *Lexington* were ordered to patrol the disputed area. The crews were on yellow alert and all weapons batteries were on full power. If trouble arose they would be ready.

Spock was in his quarters. The long day had finally ended. Drills had been run until the ship was operating at peak efficiency. Spock had been everywhere, making sure all department heads had everything ready, that their personnel was up to full strength. He had gone to Sickbay last. He had avoided McCoy as best as he could for the past few weeks and had managed to control himself even when Kirk was around, so only rarely did he get caught doing weird things.

McCoy was in his office catching up on reports when Spock walked in. He looked up, his eyebrows on the rise when he saw who it was.

"You have a problem, Mr. Spock?"

"No, Doctor, I am running a systems check and wanted to make sure everything was all right in your department."

"As far as I know. How about a drink?" He stopped short, almost stunned by his offer. There was no way Spock would accept, it had been an automatic reaction.

Suddenly Spock lunged across the room and grabbed the Saurian brandy and a couple of glasses. McCoy looked at him in astonishment. He had not seen the bottle rise from the shelf.

"Give it to me!" Spock's voice was low and fierce.

"Spock, are you all right?"

Spock flushed a deep green which seemed to be a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment. "I am perfectly all right, Doctor. I would like to share a brandy with you." His expression said otherwise but McCoy didn't comment. He took the brandy from Spock and poured himself a large drink, then shoved the bottle over to Spock who poured a minuscule amount into his glass and drank it hurriedly. "Now I must be going. Thank you." He threw an angry look at the wall to his right, then turned to leave. McCoy shook his head and downed his drink.

The intercom interrupted his thoughts. "Priority One message from Starfleet Command, Mr. Spock."

"Put the ship on red alert, get all department heads on the bridge."

The Klingons had attacked the Gorns and the *Enterprise* and *Lexington* were ordered to render whatever

assistance was required.

"Damn Starfleet, anyway," said McCoy, "we've only got a month left. This crew needs a break, not a battle!"

"Nonetheless, Doctor," said Spock quietly, "we have received our orders."

The Gorns were outnumbered. The *Lexington* had arrived first and was almost overwhelmed by the Klingon battleships. But with the less well-equipped Gorns, they managed to last until the *Enterprise* arrived.

As he had stood so often in the past weeks, Kirk was by the command chair as they closed the distance between themselves and the battling ships. Spock's mind was racing as he tried to formulate a plan of action.

"Spock, why don't you try passing at top warp speed and use the torpedoes? Don't let the Klingons have a chance to line up return fire."

Spock didn't see any reason why it wouldn't work. Two of the Klingon battle cruisers were destroyed before they even knew the *Enterprise* was there.

"What the hell was that?" asked Wesley as the *Lexington* broke free.

"The *Enterprise*, sir. They're almost out of sensor range. They must have been going at least warp 8 when they passed us."

"Looks like that Vulcan learned something from Kirk. Full ahead, Mr. Stone, we've got a fight to finish!"

The battle was long and vicious. The two Federation starships worked as a perfect team. Time and again, Wesley was stunned by Spock's battle plan, how he would so often anticipate what the *Lexington* was going to do.

McCoy stood in the background watching Spock. He would sit for long minutes in attentive silence while the battle raged around him, then his orders would come in rapid fire order. As he watched, McCoy slowly became aware of the fact that Spock was using tactics which he had only seen Kirk use before, often he would use terms he had only ever heard Kirk use. He found himself wondering if Spock really was losing his mind or if he was actually seeing...

"Ship off port bow!"

"Hard about, Mr. Sulu, fire phasers two and four."

The *Enterprise* spun and the phasers fled in blue streaks from the ship's batteries. They were rocked from direct hits on the bridge, but the Klingon ship was destroyed.

The crew picked themselves up from the floor. Uhura held her arm which was obviously broken but was back at her station in a flash. Only Chekov did not get up. Sulu glanced at him, then took over both stations. Spock, green blood running down the side of his face, took over on scanners. McCoy went from person to person, sucking in his breath as he saw the damage caused by the tremendous phaser blast.

"Spock, I'll take the scanners, they need you in command." Spock didn't argue. They were understaffed and Kirk knew the computer system better than anyone else left standing on the bridge.

"Shields three and four are obliterated, Spock, the others are weak. Try to hold the ship sideways as much as possible."

"Lt. Uhura, contact Commodore Wesley. Inform him of our problem and see if he can defend our flank. Mr. Sulu, what is our weapons status?"

"Phasers out, sir, photon torpedoes still operational."

"Mr. Scott..." Spock's hand held the intercom open to Engineering. "...engine status?"

"We're in fair shape here, Mr. Spock. We can take a bit more pounding before we're in trouble."

"Good. Spock out."

"Spock, you should attack full out..."

Spock's eyebrow rose at the unexpected suggestion.

"...the Klingons know the *Enterprise* is hurt, the last thing they will expect you to do is go at them. Don't tell Wesley - he'll see what you're doing and he'll back you up."

"That could be a suicide move."

The serious hazel eyes held his. "This is a battle that the Federation must win, Spock, in this case the *Enterprise* would be considered expendable."

The dark eyes didn't leave Kirk's as the orders were given, then Spock moved forward into the navigator's chair, his fingers poised over the torpedo release.

"Good shooting, Spock."

Glancing back, Spock saw Kirk sitting in the command chair, sitting once again in his rightful place.

The ploy was successful. The Klingons were caught off guard. As Kirk had predicted, Wesley immediately understood what the *Enterprise* was doing. Before the Klingons could regroup, the Gorns had also figured out what the Federation starships were doing and joined in.

But the Klingons didn't give up without a fight. The *Enterprise* was closest and took the worst punishment.

But finally the Klingons were defeated.

The ship was running from auxiliary control, Scotty in command now, the highest ranking officer still on his feet. The bridge crew had been literally carried off the bridge, the bridge having been almost completely destroyed. The *Lexington* had been much less damaged and was running a subtle escort duty back to home base.

McCoy had been on his feet without a break for thirty-six hours, first in surgery, then mending lesser wounds, and trying to help the broken minds. Very occasionally he would stop by intensive care where M'Benga and Christine were fighting a futile battle to save Spock's life. The Vulcan had refused to leave the weapons control when the bridge started exploding. He had yelled at everyone else to get out but had continued his attack on the fleeing Klingon ships. McCoy had hesitated momentarily, causing Spock to look up at him. Their eyes held for a moment, then Spock said softly, "It's all right, Doctor, I am not alone. Jim and I will manage..."



McCoy had finally poured himself a large drink when M'Benga came in, a look of defeat on his face.

"You were right, it was a useless attempt."

McCoy nodded. "But one you had to make. How's Christine taking it?"

"I sent her to her quarters, she was trying to be stoic."

"Okay, I'll make out the report. Spock left his will with me. You'd better take a break."

The Vulcan's body was lying in the gloom when McCoy walked in. He stood looking at it for a long moment. First Jim, now Spock. He thought of the *Enterprise* as he had first known it almost five years earlier. It had had a bright future then, a new Captain, youngest in history, a crew full of top people, a purpose in life, a sense of adventure that McCoy had seen nowhere else, nor did he ever expect to see it again. The *Enterprise* he had known was dead.

He turned to go back to his office to get the forms he needed. He whacked his knee on the door as it opened and hobbled into the room, swearing loudly at the sharp pain.

"You'd better watch your language, Bones, it's getting saltier than ever."

"Indeed, Captain, I had noted the same thing recently..."

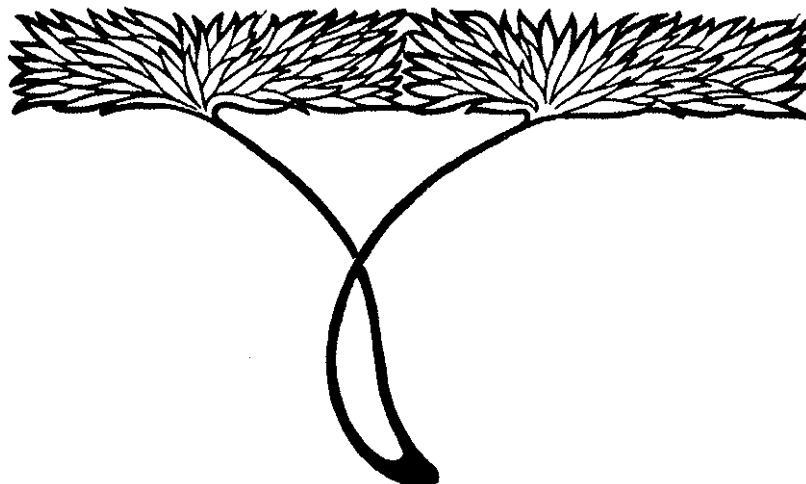
McCoy looked up in astonishment to see Kirk nursing a glass of Saurian brandy. Spock was standing by his side.

"Illusion, Doctor? Hallucination? It's in the eye of the beholder, is it not?"

Kirk smiled slightly at Spock's words, then he looked at McCoy. "Take care, Bones, we'll be waiting..."



The half empty glass of brandy still sits, untouched, beside the bottle it was poured from. It, too, is waiting....



One Good Turn . . .

The security guards were nervous. They had been on duty now for four hours and the prisoner had yet to move or acknowledge their presence. They were familiar with the events which had brought him here, his actions belying the fact that they could have been accomplished by one man - the death and destruction he had left behind were awesome in the telling. And he had deliberately disobeyed a Command order, after being warned of the consequences for doing so. Starfleet obviously thought that there was a good reason for the warning. How could they let someone so insubordinate remain in command of a Starship? The minutes ticked past. Then a noise came from the corridor and the door opened.

"They're ready for him."

The prisoner looked up, the expression on his face allowing no hint of what he was thinking. He rose to his feet, in obvious pain, but neither guard made any move to help. Something about the man told them he would not accept their aid. The small group slowly made their way to the hearing room.

There was a deathly silence as he entered. He looked around the room. Yes, they were there, all of them. He knew without asking that they had fought for him, had argued and pleaded against the only sentence which could be imposed for the crime of which he was guilty. And he knew that they had lost, they were unable to hide their expressions of frustration and pity. He was grateful for their attempt, but he hadn't expected the outcome to be any different. He knew from the moment he had ordered the ship to turn back that this would be the only outcome if he were to survive.

The military court was reconvening. His peers were coming to pronounce judgement upon him. He unconsciously stood straighter.

Admiral Farnat looked at the man in front of him and felt a twinge of regret. There were few officers as valuable to Starfleet as this one, but this last act could not go unpunished - it was not an isolated incident, there had been other times when he had deliberately ignored Command orders. He had been warned, and he had ignored that warning. Farnat took a deep breath.

"Commander Spock, it is the judgement of this court that you willfully and deliberately disobeyed a direct order of the High Command, that you exposed the *Enterprise* and her crew to unnecessary danger. It is the agreement of this court that you be stripped of your rank and sent to the penal colony on Carbel 3, for the maximum sentence."

The dark eyes never wavered, the slender figure remained emotionless. He heard the rumble of hushed voices as the severity of the sentence sank in. No one had been given the maximum sentence in the memory of those in attendance. A word from Farnat brought immediate silence. Looking back at Spock, he continued, "You will leave immediately for Carbel in the company of Base security personnel. Court dismissed."

They started to rise when a quiet voice brought them to a halt. "Admiral, I do have one request. Would I be allowed to see Captain Kirk before I leave?"

Farnat hesitated, then spoke a few words into the communications console. They waited in silence for the reply. When it came, he looked up at Spock, "Affirmative - you may go directly there."

As they left the hearing room, Leonard McCoy joined the group. The security men made room for him to walk along side of the Vulcan. Neither spoke - words were unnecessary - besides, McCoy couldn't think of anything to say. His throat hurt from the emotions he was trying to control. How unfair and unfeeling the service was - the book made no exceptions for people and friendship. Spock was punished for caring, and for acting on that emotion. McCoy had fought for Spock, even though he knew it was hopeless. The hard faces told him that this time the High Command

was not going to yield.

But Spock had already told him that. McCoy's mind went back to that night - that long night - when he and Spock had sat in the Sickbay and Spock had talked, non-stop, for several hours. He had let out years of pain and hurt, of frustration, and of love. McCoy had listened, his entire being aching to help the lonely man across the desk, but knowing that all he could do was to be there and to offer his understanding. There was only one person who could help Spock, and that person lay in the room beyond, terribly injured, his life forces on complete support, and no one knowing if he would live or die.

They stopped outside the intensive care unit. McCoy looked at the security detail, subdued anger shining from his blue eyes. "You people stay here. We don't need any heavy-footed military in there. I will guarantee the Commander's behavior..." The security men exchanged looks, then their leader nodded. "We'll wait, Doctor." The anger died in McCoy's eyes and he nodded. They weren't bad men - they were just following orders, as they all were.

Spock and McCoy stepped into a large room. The bright lights hurt the Vulcan's eyes and he was forced to squint. The figure in the bed was covered with a life support unit, the machine whirring and clicking, pushing air in and out of the lungs, keeping the heart beating at a normal rate. Spock noted again that, although the rest of the body was broken and battered, the face was untouched. He walked to the side of the bed. Jim Kirk's eyes were closed, his face peaceful. The brown hair was tousled, and the familiar strand was down over his forehead. Spock gently pushed it back - a stab of pain passing through him as he did so. Would he ever see this man again? See him laugh and tease, see him swing into action, make command decisions..."

McCoy saw the pain on Spock's face and knew the sense of loss the Vulcan was feeling. He reached across the bed and put his hand on Spock's. Spock raised his eyes, not needing to put the question into words.

"I honestly don't know, Spock. He hasn't slipped - but there's no improvement either. All we can do now is wait - wait and hope."

Spock nodded and looked down at his friend. He was going back to a world where he would be totally alone, different, an outsider. Jim Kirk had saved him from that for a short while. Now it would be worse than before - he had been stripped of rank and respect, branded for life. If Kirk lived it would be worth it, but if he died...

"Come on, Spock, we have to go." Spock tore his eyes from Kirk's face. Sensing McCoy's anguish, he struggled to show a calm exterior - it would at least make this parting easier for one of them. At the entrance to the room, McCoy stopped. "I'll do everything I can, Spock." The Vulcan's dark eyes flashed his thanks, although no word was spoken. Then Spock did something he had never done before to the doctor - he lifted his right hand in the Vulcan salute. Then he quietly walked out to the waiting guards. McCoy stood looking at the closed doors, his eyes filling with tears.



A year had passed since McCoy had stood blindly watching the Vulcan walk out of his life. Now he was standing with Dr. Justin Weiland, head of the Dobney Clinic - famed galaxy-wide as the best medical facility for the treatment of traumatic injury. They were watching James Kirk who was sitting in the middle of the courtyard, his back resting against a giant hybuck tree. The sunlight filtering down through the branches above his head somehow lessened the paleness of his skin and softened the drawn lines of his face.

"You've done a tremendous job, Justin," said McCoy as he looked at Kirk. Weiland smiled but said nothing. He had put himself personally in charge of James Kirk's case. He and McCoy had stood by Kirk's bed shortly after his transfer from the *Enterprise*. The scanners over the bed had given the stark report: crushed right hip, both legs broken, seemingly irreparable nerve damage and - worst of all - shattered vertebrae in the neck, threatening life-long paralysis. There had been bleeding in the lungs and abdomen which McCoy had finally stopped, but there remained extensive damage in those areas as well.

McCoy had turned to Weiland and spoke in a voice which was not his own. "Justin, you're his only hope. He should be dead - God alone knows why he's not. I've kept up with your latest research - the work you've been doing with nerve transplants and regenerating nerve tissue." Looking at his friend lying so helpless in front of him, he went on, "He's got to get better..." The strained voice broke, the doctor in him knowing the almost hopeless request he had made of a friend.

Weiland's hand had found McCoy's shoulder. "We'll try, Leonard," he'd said gently. "We'll try."

Weiland had labored through those long months when everyone else had given up, when they had said the situation was hopeless and it would be better to let Kirk die than prolong his agony. But Weiland knew McCoy, and he saw the bitter struggle he had put up before Starfleet had quite literally forced him back to the *Enterprise*. Weiland was also swayed by Kirk's determination to live. Something just wouldn't let go, wouldn't let that tortured body lying, vegetable-like, under the life support unit slip into oblivion. The active brain wouldn't let Kirk admit defeat - not while someone was trying to help.

So Weiland had struggled, and Kirk had struggled with him. Together they had beaten the odds and now Kirk would live and return to his work, to his duties as a starship commander. He would recover completely, mentally and physically, from the tremendous injuries that he had received those many months ago. Weiland knew the details of the events leading to Kirk's arrival at his clinic, but he never discussed them with his patient. Now McCoy was here to do that and Weiland could only hope that the iron nerve which had pulled the Captain through those long months of suffering would not desert him now.

Kirk heard footsteps and turned to watch McCoy walk across the courtyard. A wide grin spread over his face as he looked at his friend. McCoy stopped as he reached Kirk - the two of them staring at each other, neither daring to speak, not trusting their voice to get past the hard lumps in their throats. McCoy started to reach out a hand and was almost instantly enveloped in a bear hug from his Captain. He returned it wholeheartedly, all the months of worry melting away in the arms which surrounded him. Weiland had sent McCoy constant reports concerning Kirk's extraordinary recovery, but until this moment, he had never wholly believed them - the possibility of complete recovery from such brutal injuries was next to impossible! Dr. Weiland turned away from the entrance, the reward of all those exhausting months having been given by the reunion of the two men.

They let go of each other, half laughing, half crying - expending emotion which had built up for so long.

"Bones, it's good to see you!" Kirk finally managed to get out. "It's been so long!"

"You look great, Jim," said the doctor, his voice shaking, realizing as he said it how often he had wondered if he would ever say those words again. Kirk laughed at his friend as McCoy wiped his eyes.

"Hey, come on - this isn't a funeral, you know. Dr. Weiland tells me that I'm all right, that I can get out of here. Bones - I can command the *Enterprise* again! If you only knew the months I laid in that bed, dreaming of being with you and Spock, just like it was before. I think it was the only thing that kept me going." He grinned when he saw the sober look clouding McCoy's face. "I knew the two of you needed me there to stop you from fighting. I hate to think of what has been going on without me. How is that calculating Vulcan anyway, he..."

He broke off, for McCoy had broken eye contact and was staring at the ground. "Bones, what's wrong? Has something happened to Spock?!" McCoy winced as his arms were caught in a vise-like grip which was aided by a desperate fear that ran through Kirk. The doctor looked at his friend, hating himself for having to inflict more pain on this man who had already been through so much.

Kirk was shaking him. "McCoy, what's wrong - where's Spock?! Tell me!"

McCoy freed himself from Kirk's grasp. "Jim, sit down," he said. Seeing the stubborn look he knew so well, he added, "That's a medical order! Sit down!" The voice was so fierce that Kirk obeyed without protest. McCoy sat opposite him. The doctor took a deep breath.

"Jim, do you remember anything about that last mission?"

Kirk nodded.

"All right. Shortly after you beamed down to Plagnet, the *Enterprise* received orders to proceed back to the Star Base immediately. No reason was given. Spock sent word that you and the landing party were on the planet and had been out of contact for four hours, and requested permission to stay to find you. The reply was negative - we were to depart immediately. Spock was reluctant, but he gave the order. We hadn't gone far before Uhura announced that a pair of Klingon warships were advancing on Plagnet. Spock contacted headquarters with the information. It seemed that they already knew, and were removing the *Enterprise* to safety until other starships could arrive to back us up. Spock was warned to continue to the Base. Jim - he couldn't leave you behind without trying a rescue - he deliberately disobeyed the order. The *Enterprise* turned and went back."

McCoy couldn't take Kirk's penetrating gaze any longer. He got to his feet and walked a few steps away, knowing that those eyes were following his every move, though Kirk was silent. After a steadying breath, he continued.

"He left Scotty in charge and he and I beamed down to the surface. He didn't want me to go, but he was almost irrational in his quiet Vulcan way and I didn't dare let him go by himself. It didn't take us long to find you, or rather, what was left of you. After that, I don't really know what happened, there have been so many different versions. Spock left and gave us strict orders not to follow. If he wasn't back by the time Scotty made his pass to beam us up, we were to leave him there. His eyes really scared me - I'd never seen them so dark and expressionless. The suppressed anger was more violent than any emotional demonstration could have been. Scotty told me afterwards that the Klingons had been stopped cold. There was only one other Federation person on that planet besides me, Jim, the only person who could have been responsible."

Kirk's eyes were glued to McCoy's face. The doctor wished he didn't have to continue. "So, we went back to the Star Base. Spock was arrested for disobeying orders..."

"Arrested!" Kirk exploded. "After what he had done to stop the Klingons?!"

"Jim, please. Look - I tried. I argued with everyone from the most junior clerk in the Judge Advocate's

office to the head of the Cabinet. They were gunning for Spock this time. He had gone off on his own once too often - this time right after he had been expressly forbidden to."

"What was the sentence?"

McCoy swallowed, his throat suddenly very dry. "They threw the book at him, stripped him of his rank - maximum sentence in a penal colony."

Kirk shut his eyes and buried his face in his hands. "Where?" he asked.

"Carbel."

The two men sat under the large tree, the sunlight still falling through its gently moving branches, but the joyful mood of a short time ago was shattered - the terrible harshness of reality had intruded.

"How long ago?"

"He's been there almost a year, Jim. I've tried to see him when the *Enterprise* has been in the area, but it's not allowed. Visitors are only permitted on rare occasions. No messages are allowed - nothing."

"They told me he was busy with his duties aboard the *Enterprise*," Kirk whispered bitterly. "That he would come as soon as possible..."

McCoy's voice was sympathetic. "Don't you think you had enough to worry about?"

"Yeah...I guess you're right." Kirk admitted. "I didn't mean to sound ungrateful." He stood and started back to the buildings, the doctor following. McCoy noted analytically that Kirk moved just as he had before the attack. There was no trace of a limp. Dr. Weiland and his staff had certainly done a job in accomplishing that.

"Bones, I'm getting him out of there."

"Jim, you can't..."

Kirk whirled. "Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Doctor!" he said fiercely. Then his eyes softened. "Sorry..."

McCoy smiled slightly. "That's all right. You needed something to lash out at - I just happened to be in the way."



The yard was full of soving figures, representatives from all over the galaxy, thrown together against their will into one common bond of anger - anger against their surroundings, against their loss of freedom, against each other. To the uninitiated, it would have been difficult to distinguish Carbel's facilities from those of any other institution, for it resembled the outlay of a contemporary university. Vast areas were set aside for lawns and gardens, the buildings were modern and well-kept. There were no bars, no outward sign that it was a penal colony. Carbel was, in fact, a combination of many things - hospital, education center, trade school - everything necessary to prepare men and women to return successfully to the worlds they had left. Only the force fields - visible by their slight shimmer - betrayed the presence of discipline. But security was tight; there was scarcely a building which was not equipped in such a way as to isolate itself, its rooms, and surrounding yards from the rest of the complex if trouble erupted. The entire system was controlled from one central building which housed the Director's headquarters.

Spock was standing apart, as he had from the day he'd arrived. His natural Vulcan aloofness ostracized him from the humanoid inmates, while the few Vulcan prisoners shunned him for his famed hybrid heritage. Although there were therapy sessions to ease the transition back into galactic societies, many inmates retained their hate for real or imagined wrongs, and used Spock as a whipping boy, for he would do nothing to defend himself. There was seldom physical abuse - the facility was run too well to allow it - but physical abuse would almost have been easier for Spock to accept. He had been on Carbel for over a year - not once in that time had there been any word from outside. But he kept hoping.

A security guard approached him. A slight feeling of surprise pushed at the back of his mind. Why was he being sought out? No one but the other prisoners had tried to talk to him since he'd arrived.

"The Director wants to see you." The voice was surly, but it was being directed at him. He nodded, and followed the guard. Insults followed him across the yard but he did not hear them. He had long ago blocked out the sounds of those angry voices.

But the figure on the observation deck had not learned to block them out. A great sadness crossed his face as he watched the spare, lonely man move across the open space below him. He turned away from the scene, struggling for control, momentarily wondering if he had done the right thing by coming.

A knock on the door announced Spock's arrival. It opened, and for two men, time stood still. The Director shuffled uneasily from one foot to the other, then excused himself. He was used to dealing with hate and anger - what he was seeing now was an emotion he was not equipped to handle. Neither man noticed his leave.

Spock managed to speak first, his voice threatening to break at any moment. "Jim, you're..."

"Don't say it, Spock," said Kirk with a wide smile - tears half blotting out the mischievous glint in his eyes - "It would be illogical, since I am standing here."

Spock looked so ridiculous standing there gaping that Kirk laughed. The sound finally put the Vulcan into action - he took a couple of steps forward and grabbed Kirk's arms. "You really are all right!" he said, a smile flashing across the normally solemn features. Then, standing back as he took in Kirk's dress, "Your duty status, Captain, you are..."

"The *Enterprise* is in orbit, Spock. I've been reassigned to her. Everyone is still there - McCoy, Scotty, Sulu..." He broke off, then started again. "Spock, I'm fighting this thing. I'm going to get you out of here."

Spock's mask fell back into place. "Captain, I disobeyed a direct Command order. Starfleet was completely within its rights to press charges."

"But not these charges, Spock. No one has ever been so severely disciplined. Somebody is harboring a grudge. I'm going to find out who."

"Jim - you will only stir up trouble for yourself. I'm quite comfortable here, the treatment is good..."

"And the others in the yard..." Kirk interrupted, "...is your 'treatment' good there, too?"

Spock closed his eyes for a moment. So Kirk had seen that. "I can tolerate it, Captain," he replied.

"Well, I can't," said Kirk, his anger evident in his voice. Then it softened, "Spock, I need you on the *Enterprise*. I didn't realize how much until I took command of her and you weren't there."

Spock didn't answer. He desperately wanted to be with his Captain, and he knew any answer he gave would betray his feelings. He wished to spare Kirk that.

A knock sounded and the Director opened the door. "I'm afraid your time is up, Captain. You know we don't normally allow outsiders here - it was only because of special orders..."

"Yes," said Kirk, "I appreciate the trouble you've gone to. Spock..." The Vulcan was withdrawing into his shell, his hands going behind his back in that familiar stance.

"Thank you for coming, Captain," he responded formally, aware of the Director's gaze. He started to move toward the door but Kirk's voice stopped him.

"I'll be back, Spock - you can count on it."

The Vulcan stood silently for a moment but did not turn back to his friend. Then he walked out without acknowledging Kirk's words. As the silence continued, the Director felt obligated to say something.

"He has been a model inmate, Captain. He has caused no problems..." His voice faded away, for Kirk had turned toward him and there was such a look of guilt and anger on his face that the Director was afraid to continue. He did not know that the look was being directed inward - that Kirk was blaming himself for what had happened to his friend.

Finally, Kirk spoke. "Thank you for allowing me to see him." He pulled his communicator out and signalled the *Enterprise*. Within seconds, he was back aboard the ship.



The weeks passed. The *Enterprise* was patrolling a quiet sector of the galaxy. There was no pressing business, no trouble of any sort. Kirk was grateful for the assignment, since it allowed him the free time he needed to prepare his case for Spock's appeal and defense. He and McCoy stayed up far into the night tossing questions back and forth - Kirk coming up with arguments and McCoy countering with objections.

After a while, Kirk looked at McCoy with exasperation. "Your logic can be as annoying as Mr. Spock's, Doctor!"

McCoy smiled gently. "Why, thank you, Captain. I consider that a compliment."

Kirk's irritation faded and a small smile answered the doctor. "You're welcome, Bones. But it doesn't exactly help get Spock off Carbel. They've got an airtight case against him. He really put his foot in this one..."

He was interrupted by a call from the bridge. He pressed the communicator in front of him.

"Kirk here."

"Message from Starfleet, Captain."

"Relay it here, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk looked thoughtfully at the intercom. They were on routine patrol at the moment, there was no reason for any contact with Starfleet. Then an image started to appear on the screen. He unconsciously straightened as he recognized who it was.

"Hello, Jim." Looking at the viewer, the image of Commodore Lauren Patterson appeared as lovely as ever. Kirk's face softened into a small smile.

"Commodore," he replied, "this is indeed a pleasant surprise."

"A break in the monotony, anyway," she replied. "You have a change in orders, Captain," Patterson continued, a

more serious tone coming into her voice. The smile on Kirk's face slowly faded. "There was a skirmish with the Klingons a few hours ago. Nothing very serious, and the *Potemkin* dealt with it easily. But now they think it was a diversion and that another Klingon warship slipped through while they were fighting. Jie, if that's true, that ship will be headed for Carbel..."

Kirk and McCoy exchanged surprised looks.

"...there are several Klingon agents being held there. We were negotiating for their release, but talks broke down a few days ago. I think this is the Klingon answer to our requests for resumption of those talks. You are to divert to Carbel and stop them, peacefully if possible, but if not..."

"Understood, Commodore. We'll do our best."

The image faded, leaving the two friends staring at each other.

"Jie, is there any way we could get a message to Spock?"

Kirk shook his head. "Even if we could, Bones, what good would it do? He's an inmate there - not a Command Officer."

Contacting Engineering, Kirk ordered Scotty to be ready for warp maneuvers, then got Sulu to lay in the course for Carbel - top warp speed, as soon as possible.



The day was passing in the same way as 427 days had passed previously. Spock was sitting in his usual corner of the courtyard, away from the others, keeping his own company. Suddenly, the loudspeakers blared.

"Everyone form lines - court time is cancelled for the rest of the day."

The announcement was met by grumbling, but the lines were formed. Punishment was rare but when it was handed out, it was done swiftly and painfully. Spock moved quietly to his place and within a few minutes was back in his small room, the door securely locked behind him. There was bedlam around him, a tenseness was running through the building and it was making everyone uneasy. Spock shut his eyes and concentrated on making some sense of the voices around him. Then two of the guards stopped just outside his room and his sensitive ears had no trouble in overhearing their conversation. His eyebrows rose. The situation obviously called for some planning. He lay down on the bed and was soon lost in thought.



Kirk was pacing in the confining area of his quarters when the buzzer rang. The door opened to admit McCoy. The Captain looked at him briefly but did not stop his pacing, nor did he give any word of greeting. McCoy settled into a chair and watched his friend move restlessly around the room. Finally, Kirk flung himself onto the bed, his unseeing eyes staring at the ceiling. The silence stretched out.

"I'm going to fail him, Bones," he said after a while. "We're not going to get to Carbel in time. I promised him I'd get him out of that place - I never meant like this."

Before McCoy had a chance to answer, there was a call from the bridge.

"Sulu here, Captain. We're coming into sensor range of Carbel."

"On my way."

As Kirk arrived on the bridge, he was informed that the Klingon warship was moving out of orbit.

"I don't think they want to tangle with us, Captain," said Scotty, as he got up from the command chair.

"Did anyone beam up from the surface?" Kirk asked.

"No, sir - not unless they did so before we came into scanner range. But it would be like the lily-livered cowards to leave their landing party stranded down there."

"Scotty, take the *Enterprise* and catch that ship - cripple her, destroy her if necessary, but don't let her get back home. Bones, come with me - we're going to beam down. I've got to find out what happened. Let us know as soon as you get back, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir."

"Jie, you can't..." McCoy's voice faded as the turbo-lift doors closed behind them. When they arrived in the transporter room, he was quiet. Whatever argument he had had with the Captain, he had obviously lost.



They stood in unbelieving silence on the planet's surface. The destruction was almost total - fire still burned and heavy smoke stung their nostrils. The ordered buildings that Kirk remembered from a few months earlier were gone. In their place were fallen walls, broken windows, and doors blasted open. Kirk grabbed McCoy's arm. "Come on!" he shouted. McCoy followed at a run, not knowing where his Captain was heading, but not wanting to lose him in the mass of rubble.

The Captain was heading for the building which housed the Director's office. In the distance, he saw that it was still standing. They clambered over the debris while - unseen by them - some alien figures were also running,

but away from the building the two Federation men were entering. Kirk ducked under some fallen roofing beams and got to the office. The door was securely locked. He banged loudly but received no answer. He melted the lock with his phaser and pushed the door open. One quick look took him stumbling to the middle of the room.

"Bones!" His voice was anguished.

McCoy bent over the crumpled figure. His sensitive fingers felt for a pulse - it was there, but only just. His hands quickly ran over the prone body. Spock was hurt, and badly. He got his medical kit and took a reading. The doctor's quick intake of breath was the only inkling Kirk had of the severity of his friend's injuries.

Kirk's attention was diverted by a moan. Moving an overturned desk, he found the Director of the colony. The man didn't appear to be badly injured and seemed to recognize Kirk.

"They just left...took their agents...went that way..." He gestured weakly.

Kirk stood up, grim determination on his face. "Bones, stay with Spock, do what you can. As soon as Scotty gets back, beam up to the ship. If I'm not back, get Spock to whatever facilities are necessary. Don't wait for me!"

"Jim..."

"That's an order, Doctor!" Kirk said over his shoulder as he ran out the door. McCoy watched him leave, just as he had watched Spock leave for the same reasons almost two years before. *Why does it have to go on like this?* he thought. *Neither of these men want this to happen. How much more can I stand? I can't keep on patching them back together indefinitely!* He turned back to the Vulcan. There was little he could do without his Sickbay facilities. He checked the Director, who - except for a mild concussion - had managed to escape unhurt.



Kirk was running mad - all his pent-up emotion for Spock was being let loose in his pursuit of the aliens. As he was jumping down from a boulder, the beam from a phaser narrowly missed him, striking the ground at his feet. The resulting explosion of rock and ground flung him the rest of the way down the incline. Dazed by the nearness of the blast and the fall, he lay still, trying to get air back into his lungs. He could hear voices above him - Klingon voices.

"It is a Federation Commander," said one. "He appears to be dead."

"Let us check," came another voice. "He would make a valuable prisoner."

Kirk could hear them scrambling down the hill and tensed his muscles, waiting for the first Klingon to touch him. He didn't have long to wait. As the first one reached him, Kirk became a blur of motion, his Irish temper finally getting the better of him. He threw himself against a solid wall of Klingons. Whirling, he saw a phaser being lifted and flung himself to the ground. A brilliant light flashed and the Klingons behind him disappeared - hit by their own man. He scrambled forward and hit the last Klingon at the knees. There was a sickening crunch as the man fell. Kirk remained on his knees, the double close exposure to the lethal phaser beams draining him of any strength to get up. It was over. Those who had hurt his friend were dead - and he felt only emptiness.

"Captain?"

He looked up. Scotty was standing there, accompanied by a landing party. He slowly got to his feet. Scotty put out a hand to steady him.

"The Klingon ship is disabled, sir. The *Potemkin* is on her way there now. Mr. Spock is in the Sickbay. There were only a few survivors - they're all aboard. The sooner we beam up, the sooner we can leave this place."

Kirk nodded and shortly found himself in the transporter room. Scotty helped him to the Sickbay. He was still shaken by the nearness of the lethal phaser blast and by the explosion which had sent him sprawling down the hill. McCoy met him there, his face full of worry and strain.

"Jim, are you all right?"

Kirk nodded. "How's Spock?"

"He's..."

McCoy broke off, for Scotty had let go of Kirk's arm and the Captain started to fall forward. The surgeon and engineer steered him into the nearest chair. McCoy ran a quick check, finding nothing abnormal other than the reaction to the phaser stun.

"Thanks, Scotty," he said. "He'll be all right. Just give him a few minutes to get his bearings straight."

"Then I'll be about my business, Doctor. We should be at the Star Base in two days, Captain."

Kirk nodded, not really hearing, only having eyes for McCoy and the words he had yet to say. The doctor sat down opposite him.

"Jim - I'll give you the same answer I gave Spock about you. I don't know. He's alive. I've done all I can... so we wait." His fist slammed down on the desk, the violence of his emotions finally gaining release. "He shouldn't have to die for this! Protecting what? - a planet of misfits!"

"Bones, that isn't going to help," Kirk soothed. McCoy looked at him - the quiet hazel eyes seemed to have found their own peace. "As Spock would say, you're being illogical. If...when he recovers, he can write his own ticket back into Starfleet. Scotty told me what the Director said, how Spock broke out and almost single-handedly prevented the Klingons from beaming back to their ship. Now, tell me that's insubordination..."

McCoy shook his head. He only hoped Kirk was right. Nothing had been right for the past two years. If Jim and Spock could be together again... He got up to get some charts, and when he returned, the Captain was gone. He looked in at Spock. Sure enough, Jim was there. He left them alone, knowing theirs was a friendship which needed no intrusion. Kirk's presence would probably help the Vulcan far more than any medicine that McCoy could give him.



Kirk was too exhausted to stand, so he sat on a chair at the edge of Spock's bed. He sat for a long time, letting the Vulcan's features renew themselves in his mind. He needed this man by his side - needed his friendship and understanding far more than he needed him as First Officer. He found himself taking one of Spock's hands in both of his - the fingers were warm and limp. Kirk gently squeezed them. "Hold on, Spock," he pleaded quietly. "We've come so far - don't let go now!" There was no response, no answering squeeze. Kirk closed his eyes, still holding Spock's hand tightly.



McCoy was concerned - it was too quiet. He looked into the intensive care unit and stopped in astonishment. Spock was fully conscious, his head raised so that his eyes - which had been resting on Kirk - met the doctor's. Kirk was slumped forward, sound asleep, with his head resting against Spock's chest, both his hands firmly clasping the Vulcan's. As McCoy crossed the room, Spock motioned for him to be quiet.

"It's all right, Doctor," he whispered, "let him sleep."

McCoy took two quick scans before he nodded, then silently left the room, feeling a great weight lifting from his shoulders. Spock would recover now - that incredible Vulcan system had already taken over - and that was the only medicine Kirk needed.

As he reached his office, McCoy suddenly realized how exhausted he was himself. Stretching out on the couch, he was instantly asleep.



The weeks slipped by and the *Enterprise* went about her business. Constant reports came from the Star Base - encouraging reports. Spock was healing quickly and the time would come when he could go before the review board and - Kirk fervently hoped - have the past couple of years erased from his record.

And so it happened. Kirk felt almost in a dream as he stood before the High Command with his First Officer by his side and heard that Spock was cleared of all charges. He was to return, with his former rank and duties, to the *Enterprise*. Kirk had spent hours pleading his case to the High Command. They had been unable to deny that the *Enterprise* was the elite vessel of the Fleet, and Kirk had finally convinced them it was because of the team of officers that was assigned to the ship which made it so - that Spock was an integral part of the team and without him, the ship could not function in the same manner.

Kirk saw Admiral Farnat staring at them and knew that there was no way he could ever make that man understand why Spock was so important to him. Farnat turned to his aide and said, sotto voce, for Kirk's benefit, "How could anyone have such feelings for an alien who so obviously feels nothing?" Kirk smiled to himself, for he was sure that Spock was putting the finishing touches to Farnat's statement - there was not a flicker of expression on the Vulcan's face. They might just as well have been telling him that his life was about to end, not that it was just beginning!



The three sat together in Kirk's quarters, the first time they had done so in a long while. The brandy in front of them was the best that could be obtained - suitable for the occasion. Little had been said in the past few minutes - each man was lost in his own thoughts and feelings. Then Spock broke the silence.

"I do not think that Admiral Farnat was very happy to reinstate me, Captain."

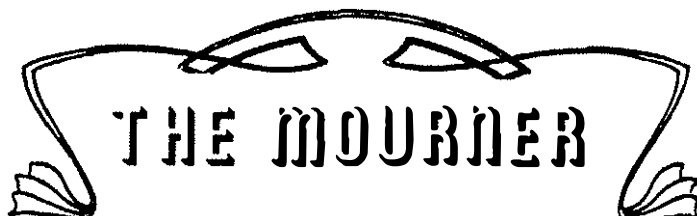
Before Kirk had a chance to answer, McCoy couldn't resist saying, "He's a 'book' man, Spock. You know the type - section this, paragraph that. It goes against the grain to reverse a decision which is written down right in front of his nose."

Spock's eyebrows rose. "Against the grain? I don't recall seeing that in any regulation."

McCoy grinned as he got up. "Just be glad Farnat did. I have to be going, Jim," he said as he saw Kirk's questioning look. "Physicals start tomorrow so I'd better turn in early. Have to spend most of the day tracking down the crew."

"Good night, Bones."

Kirk and Spock sat in companionable silence after McCoy had left. The Captain was staring into the depths of his glass and Spock quietly studied him. Kirk had a new maturity - the little boy look that was often present a few years ago was entirely absent. But the last couple of years had taken a lot out of both of them. Kirk looked up and his hazel eyes deepened almost to brown. Spock knew the emotion the Captain felt. It would probably never be expressed in words, but it was enough that they both knew it existed. The happenings of the past two years had only served to strengthen and deepen that bond which held them - each so different - closer than either had ever expected. Kirk sealed and raised his glass. Spock solemnly raised his in silent acknowledgment, his dark eyes mirroring the unspoken statement in his Captain's eyes.



He came from his palace grand,
He came to my cottage door.
His words were few but his look
Will linger forever more.
The look in his sad, dark eyes
More tender than words could be,
But I was nothing to him,
And he was the world to me.

I suppose you could say our planet is unusual in this galaxy of ours. It is said that other worlds contain strange and wonderful things - exotic unknowns, wondrous beings.

Of this I know nothing, for our world is unlike any other I have heard of. My ancestors came from the Old World, centuries ago, looking for a place where they could live their lives as they wished, to continue the old ways so important to them. They wanted nothing of the new technologies that were threatening to take over men's lives, new ideas which were supposedly so much better than the old.

My family is not important, yet we can trace our lineage back to the early 1400's in Old England, on the Earth as it once was. I have never been to Earth, but I hear it is no longer the world I have heard about since childhood. I think I prefer where I am, the peaceful countryside with its low stone walls, the sheep and cattle dotting the fields. The villages are scattered yet not so distant that we can't reach our neighbors for community gatherings and dances. I love the dances, so gay and happy, everyone dressed so beautifully, the girls in their long dresses and the boys so handsome in their billowing white shirts and vests.

Our house is right on the edge of the village, its thatched roof reaching almost to the ground. My room is in the eaves and I have it to myself now that my sister is married. From my bed I can see 'The Castle' belonging to our great family. It's really only a grand house, but it has been called The Castle for as long as I can remember. The Stewarts live there. They are the most famous of all our planet's great families, the most wealthy and the most powerful, yet also the kindest and most generous. They own our village and all the countryside around us, yet they are always so very concerned about our welfare.

Old Mr. Stewart had always been here. He is very old now, in his 90's. His son, Anthony, was away for a very long time but returned several years ago. He followed the example set by his uncles and joined the military. He had a glorious career and retired as an Admiral. He is a kind man, and since his return he has shown a great interest in the doings of our village.

Strangers are almost unknown in our district, our planet is not popular to outsiders. Our ways are strange to most, and I suppose there are other planets which offer more excitement. Whatever the reason, they rarely come.

The spring had been warm that year and the lilac bushes flowered early. Their perfume filled the light breeze and flowed out over the open fields. The wild strawberries were at their prime and she was filling her basket full,

pausing occasionally to enjoy their lovely tart flavor. She loved this time of year with everything around her blossoming, the vigour of their new growth standing defiant to life in all their glory.

She was kneeling in the shadows watching the antics of some baby rabbits at play just outside the safety of the hedgerow, laughing at their silly games. Suddenly they disappeared, startled by the approach of something they feared.

She looked out into the open and saw a stranger slowly making his way through the tall grass of the meadow. She didn't know why she stayed hidden - there was something about him which spoke of a terrible loneliness. While all about him was shouting of the joy of life, he carried an air of sadness.

He stopped just short of where she knelt, his attention on something in the distance. She held her breath, hoping to remain hidden, not wanting to intrude when he so obviously wanted to be alone. She had never seen anyone so handsome, not even Brian whom she desperately wanted to ask her to the dance. He wore his hair shorter than was normally seen and her eyes followed the curve of his ear, exposed and accented by the unusual sideburns. His broad shoulders were accented by the simple shirt he wore, the sun glinting off the gold stripes on his sleeves. He wore black pants which followed the line of his slender hips. The boys she knew all wore the baggy pants suitable for farm work and the heavy boots necessary for working in the fields. His black boots were close fitting, covered by the flare of the dark pants.

He stood silent for a long time, his mind obviously far away. She memorized his profile, the fine line of his jaw, the almost turned up nose which should have been out of place, yet suited him perfectly. His beautiful hands hung motionless by his sides, strong hands speaking of power held contained, yet somehow not at peace.

Finally he walked on, never looking in her direction. She stayed motionless for a long time after he had disappeared from her sight, his figure indelibly etched in her mind, his sadness having erased her joy in the day.

Suddenly she realized that it was growing late and, grabbing her basket, ran back through the meadow which led to the village. Passing through the marketplace, she paused where a group of women stood talking in excited voices about the stranger she had just seen. There was much speculation on who he was and what he was doing there.

She left them and slowly walked home, the image of the stranger strong in her mind, wondering why he carried such an air of sadness. What could possibly have hurt him so badly?



"Elizabeth, are you scribbling in that silly diary again?"

She hadn't heard her mother come in and started guiltily. Blushing deeply, she quietly closed it and stood up.

Her mother smiled at her in both exasperation and fondness. At sixteen, Elizabeth had grown into a true beauty, her long brown hair cascading in graceful waves down to her waist, merry blue eyes sparkling with the love of life, the peaches and cream complexion of her ancestors glowing on her face.

"Have you weeded the garden yet?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I forgot all about it."

"Well, get moving - you have enough time before supper."

She made her way down the steep, polished stairs and, as she entered the kitchen, her brother Jeremy walked in. Jeremy was a big, strapping youth, two years Elizabeth's senior, and he worked in the stables up at The Castle. He was very fond of his sister, although at times he still found her childish.

Glancing behind her, Elizabeth saw her mother had not followed her.

"Jeremy, is it true?"

He grinned at her, strong, white teeth flashing on his tanned face. "Is what true?"

"You know what I'm talking about - the stranger, the man I saw this afternoon, is he really staying with the Stewarts?"

"Little sister, I thought you were too old for idle gossip?"

"Jeremy!"

He laughed and fluffed her hair. "Yes, my nosey one, there is someone staying at The Castle. It is said he is from Earth and is an old friend of the Admiral."

"What's happened to him?"

He swung a couple of buckets off the floor. "Can't say, haven't seen him...." and disappeared out the door.

She ran after him. "Jeremy, please!"

He stopped just outside the gate, his blue eyes dancing as he saw his sister's rising anger. "All right, it is said it was something terrible...."

"He isn't injured!"

"No, nothing physical, but something very important was taken away from him. Someone he deeply loved died. The Admiral invited him to come here for a while, to try to forget...."

Her hands had come up to her face. "Oh, Jeremy, was it his wife? The poor man, how hurt he must be...."

Jeremy sobered a little. "Elizabeth, don't let your romantic impulses run away with you. He is not of here." He cupped her chin in his hand. "Remember, you are sixteen and no longer a child...." He looked at her for a moment, then picked up his buckets and headed for The Castle on the hill.



The days passed. The stranger was often seen in the distance walking alone in the fields, but he never came near the village. Talk ran rampant about why he was there. Some claimed to have knowledge of mysterious happenings concerning him - that it was not his wife but his lover who had died, that he himself had killed her when he found her unfaithful, that she had killed herself, that he had sacrificed her for the honor of his sworn oath.

Gradually it was discovered that Admiral Stewart had once been his commanding officer. The stranger was a hero, he had many times saved his men from certain disaster, certain death, until the day he failed and the one so close to him had died. It was said that he no longer wanted to live, no longer found joy in the life still left to his.

"Elizabeth, you are forever daydreaming!"

She started from where she had been sitting on the low bench, the plums in the basket still unwashed.

"Never mind, run into the house and wash your hands, then take these newly embroidered linens up to The Castle."

She flew to her room and washed quickly, changing into a new, clean apron over her delicate blue dress. This was the first opportunity she had had to go to The Castle since the stranger had arrived. She swept her hair back and up to the becoming style she had recently begun to wear. She bit her lips hard to bring out their fullest color which beautifully matched the bloom in her cheeks.

"Elizabeth, they need them for tonight, not next year!"

There was a great deal of bustling at The Castle, obviously there were guests expected for the evening meal. The linens were received with grave thanks and she was given rich payment for them.

She slipped unnoticed into the seall garden - she was so close, she had to be daring, she couldn't fail to see him. Following the maze she had known by heart since childhood, she made her way to the large manicured lawns at the back of The Castle.

He was there, as she had somehow known he would be. She stopped just inside the entrance of the maze, her heart thumping. He was standing alone, looking into the distance. There was an indelible look of sadness, of loss, stamped on his handsome face. His hair was ruffled by the soft breeze and hung over his tall forehead. The young face looked as if it had endured more than a man should be asked to bear, yet he had so much farther to go. His shoulders were slumped as if the weight of his sorrow had finally proven too much.

She almost moved forward, but a sudden voice kept her where she was.

"So there you are!"

The man straightened, the terrible look of pain left his face as he turned to look at the speaker. For the first time she saw his eyes, large hazel eyes that were dark pools of sadness, eyes that would betray where the face might not.

Admiral Stewart came across the lawn. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Come, there's someone I want you to meet."

They were gone a long time before she finally turned and slowly made her way back to the cottage. Her mother commented on her silence at dinner, but she scarcely noticed, her mind too much on the large, tormented, beautiful eyes of the stranger.



The weeks passed and the gossip turned to other things, the stranger almost forgotten. He kept to himself and there were other things more important. But Elizabeth never forgot - she had stopped pestering Jeremy, as he got very angry with her constant questions and threatened to tell their parents. So she kept her thoughts to herself, sharing them only with her dreams.

Then it happened. She was busy sweeping the path to the house and hadn't heard his approach.

"Excuse me...."

She turned at the unfamiliar voice and stood speechless when she discovered him standing just behind her. He had grown much thinner since she had seen him at The Castle, but she scarcely noticed. Those haunted hazel eyes held hers unblinkingly.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I wonder if it would be possible to have a drink of water?"

He smiled a little at her apparent confusion. The smile lit his face, causing an answering smile to come to her own.

"But surely, sir, if you would care to sit?"

He accepted her invitation and she went to fetch a cup, filling it at the large pump in the kitchen. He accepted it with grave thanks, and drank.

"Would you like another, sir?"

"No, thank you."

His eyes again held hers, the eyes still shadowed with the unbearable sorrow of his memories. She felt her heart cry out to him, yearning to hold him, to comfort him, yet knowing there was nothing she could do. She knew at that moment that this was a man she could give her life to, could die for, then realized with a start that someone already had.

He stood up, obviously unaware of her thoughts that were screaming out to him. She couldn't believe that one could feel so much for another and not have it known.

He looked at her again, his eyes appearing to memorize her features. "Thank you for your kindness."

"Anytime, sir." Her voice was hardly a breathless whisper, but he didn't hear her. He had already started along the road which led to The Castle.



As the days went by, she would occasionally see him walking through the fields. Sometimes he would be at The Castle when she was there on some errand, but he never spoke to her again, never seemed to notice she was there. She lived for another moment like the one at the cottage, that moment when his eyes had held hers, when she had given him water and wanted to give him her life, but it never happened.

"It's said he's dying, you know. He's had the fever now for a week and he's no better."

Elizabeth froze as she started to enter the kitchen. Sarah, one of the maids from The Castle, was visiting.

"Oh, the Admiral does what he can, but mark my words, he doesn't want to live. He's such a gentle soul, to have to live with such memories. My heart goes out to him, to be sure. He won't find his peace in this life."

She fled to her room, tears pouring down her face. He couldn't die! How could she possibly go on living?



"Elizabeth, bring out the black."

She turned a stricken face to her mother, her voice failing her when she had to know.

"The poor man staying with the Admiral died last night. The viewing is this afternoon."

"Mummy...."

"No, dearest, you're too young."

She had to go - she couldn't leave her love unexpressed. She had to go!

"Mother," Jeremy's deep voice spoke from behind her. "I think that Elizabeth should be allowed to go."

Her eyes, filled with unshed tears, flew to his. They were met with quiet understanding. She quickly looked back at her mother.

"Please, Mummy...."

She looked at her two children for a few moments, then nodded. "All right, Elizabeth, if Jeremy thinks it's important, then I suppose you can go."

After their mother had gone, Jeremy gently held Elizabeth until she had cried herself out.

"He was not one of us, Elizabeth. You were living an impossible dream."

She lifted her tear-stained face to his. "I know, Jeremy, but doesn't everyone... sometime?" She gently moved out of his arms and went to change.



He was lying as the old custom dictated, the large bed strewn with flowers. His face was peaceful...his pain had ended.

But that is not how I will remember him, lying there, his eyes closed, long lashes fanning out over pale cheeks. I will always see the dark shadow of sorrow held in the hazel depths as his eyes held mine...that day I gave him my heart.

And now in his palace grand,
On a flower strewn bed he lies.
His beautiful lids are closed,
O'er his sad dark beautiful eyes.
And among the mourners who mourn,
Why should I a mourner be?
For I was nothing to him,
And he was the world to me.

(Traditional English folksong, 14th century)

The Flight



"Why?"

Pain-darkened hazel met haunted brown.

"Why Vulcan? Why now?"

"Captain, it is something I must do."

It is you I fear,

It is from you I run.

If I do not go now

I will be forever lost.

Eternity stood still - time ceased to be,

Neither could look away as

Two hearts cried out - too late.

Gradually anger replaced pain and

Formality matched formality,

"Then you are free to go, Commander."

and

Each was alone, left with the memory

Of the hazel/brown eyes that spoke

What the heart could not.

"Spock!"

He could not look, yet he must.

Joy, then confusion met silent plea,

The hazel questioned - the brown looked away.

It is you I fear,

It is from you I run.

If I let go now

I will be forever lost.

Welcome rejected,

Friendship extended - handed back.

Now anger was added to hurt

and

Each was alone, left with the vision

Of the hazel/brown eyes that spoke

Where the heart could not.

"Spock, were you right?"

The laugh comes easily.

I have never been so wrong.

The fear is gone,

My flight is finished,

But I have not lost.

Love-softened brown met hazel,

The name, once so hard, slips out.

Hands grip, heads nod

and

Now neither is alone, for at last

The hazel/brown eyes were free to speak

Those words that come from the heart.

The Dream

He could not remember how long he had been alone - maybe all his life. It seemed forever.

At home nowhere; friend to no one.

He did not know how long he had been standing staring at the inky blackness, as dark as his existence, offering as little hope of fulfillment as anything had offered him in the life he had not asked to live.

Then in the blackness a soft glow started, a muted gold; gentle, welcoming, a circle of light in the middle of nothingness.

He watched silent and uncertain as the glow reached out towards him.

Slowly a brilliant ring of light surrounded the gold circle - and him. He felt a sudden, inexplicable acceptance of the presence. The circle of light passed right through his body and filled him with emotions he never dreamed existed.

He did nothing to fight.

Indeed, it was open surrender.

An answering ring of light slowly left him to surround the golden circle. A dimmer circle of his own making orbited on that ring around the circle from which he now drew his life and strength.

Suddenly forever was not enough time.

Gradually a third ring formed around him, intersecting with the other, smaller, thinner, but its light just as intense. A smaller, bluish orb appeared outside the rings, accepted as belonging, yet separate from what he felt and shared with the glowing golden light.

He did not notice when the bond began forming. He did not notice when his emotions started to overwhelm the fragile control of his Vulcan training. He only noticed that the rings appeared to be shrinking, threatening to bind him, to strangle him. Suddenly the feeling of peace was gone.

The golden circle was growing, nurtured by his responding emotion. He felt his fear begin. He could not deal with what was happening. He was the one who had started it, yet he could not deal with it. The light was giving more than he could accept, giving more than he knew he could ever return. Terror-stricken, he struggled to free himself from the binding rings before the ever-strengthening bond destroyed forever the separate being he had struggled his entire life to become.

With a loud cry he broke free, destroying the golden circle which had been, for a brief moment, the center of his existence. The blackness fell again, darker than any he had ever experienced.



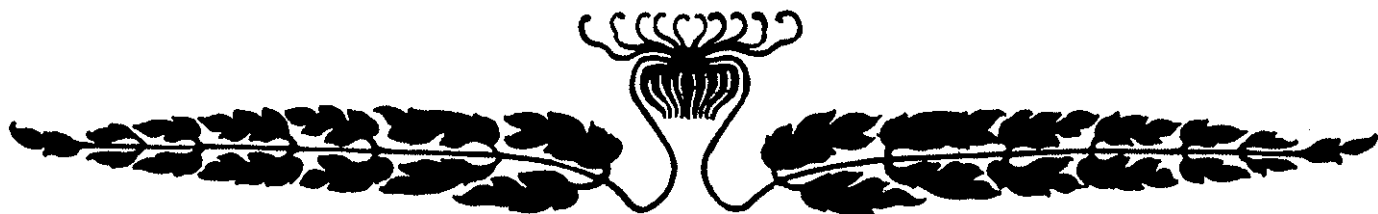
Spock woke abruptly, trembling from the horror of his dream and terrified at its meaning.

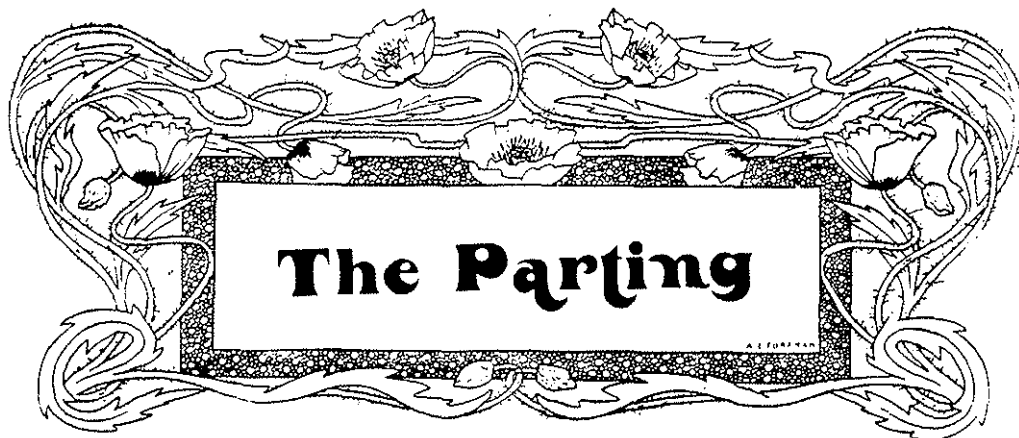
Taking a deep breath, he got up, his eyes involuntarily going to the chronometer even though he was well aware of the time. In 3.7 hours he would be standing in front of his captain, telling him of Starfleet's acceptance of his request.

In 3.7 hours he would tell James T. Kirk that he was leaving to go back to Vulcan - forever.

In 3.7 hours he would irreparably hurt the only person in the universe he loved.

A few moments ago, in a dream, he had destroyed that light. In a mere 3.7 hours he would do the same with reality.





The Parting

Leonard McCoy switched off his recorder with a sigh, then leaned back in his chair, his eyes slowly roving around his office. Tomorrow they would arrive at Earth, tomorrow their five year mission would be officially ended. There would be the endless debriefings, then countless consultations with the Surgeon General's office concerning changes in some procedures, elimination of others, and additions that should be made in his department. But for now he had nothing to do. The last of his paperwork was finished, there were no patients to take care of, and he was on his own for twenty-four hours.

Glancing at the chronometer, he decided he would get some dinner, then maybe hunt up Jim for a nightcap. He hadn't seen much of him recently; clearing up the last-minute details of the mission had kept him unusually busy and McCoy hadn't wanted to bother him. But tonight would be the last night for a long time that they would be together in the familiar surroundings of the *Enterprise*. It would be some months before the ship could be refitted, before a satisfactory replacement crew could be gathered. They would have a long R & R, but it wouldn't be the same. And once they were out again on the new mission the first weeks would be just as confused as they had been last time, and there wouldn't be time for a quiet drink.

By the time he got to dinner most people had eaten and left, but he saw Spock sitting by himself, slowly eating a vile-looking mixture of vegetables. McCoy got his meal and walked over to the Vulcan.

"Mind if I join you?"

For a moment Spock's eyes darkened, then he gestured to an empty chair and went back to his meal. McCoy sat down, a little surprised by Spock's odd reaction.

"Well, Spock, are you all packed yet?" Again he couldn't decipher the look Spock gave him.

"I assume that you are, Doctor."

"You assume correctly," said McCoy with a grin. "I'm going to be the first one off this tub once we're in orbit."

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly at the word "tub", but he made no comment. McCoy watched him for a moment, then shrugged and turned his attention to his meal. He was surprised a few minutes later when he looked up to see Spock staring at him with a rather strange expression.

"Is something the matter, Spock?" The Vulcan seemed tense, worried about something.

"No, Doctor, there is nothing wrong." He was silent for a moment, then he went on. "Do you plan to stay at Starfleet Headquarters when you leave the ship?"

"Yes, for a few days," said McCoy, his voice and his face puzzled. "Why?"

Spock looked down at his empty plate. "Of course, you will be there for the debriefing. Do you have any plans after that?"

"Spock, what are you getting at?" McCoy was suddenly suspicious, although he didn't know of what.

"Are your plans open after the debriefing, Doctor? It is a simple enough question, surely."

"All right, the answer is yes. I've got nothing definite to do. I have some medical meetings, then I'll see how much time I have before the ship is ready to go again. Beyond that, I have nothing planned." McCoy's voice showed the annoyance that Spock's grilling had caused. "Satisfied?"

"Yes, Doctor, thank you." Spock stood, picking up his tray.

"Spock, why are you so interested in what I'm going to be doing?" Spock looked at him for a moment, then turned and left without comment. McCoy stood looking at the empty doorway, wondering what on earth was the matter with the Vulcan now. "Probably just doesn't want to say goodbye," he muttered to himself. "He's too used to ship-board life - probably doesn't know what to do with himself now that the mission's over." He finished his coffee, then started out on his search for the elusive Captain.



"Hey, Jim-boy, slow down!"

Kirk stopped and turned to see McCoy sauntering along the corridor behind him.

"You're going to give yourself a heart attack if you keep up this pace, Captain," McCoy said with a grin, his eyes taking in Kirk's exhausted face. "Do you realize that I've been tracking you for the past hour? There can't be one place on this ship that you haven't been, and I haven't followed. The crew is going to start getting suspicious."

Kirk smiled. "All right, Doctor, you've caught up with me. What do you want?"

"Oh, I thought we could have a little nightcap, jaw over old times, toast a new future."

For a moment Kirk hesitated. He had an awful lot to do and not a great deal of time to do it in. But it would be a while before he would have a quiet moment to share with McCoy again. "All right, Bones. Half an hour in my quarters? I have a couple of things to do on the bridge first."

"Sounds good to me," said McCoy with a smile. "I'll see you there."



Spock was just getting up from the communications console when Kirk stepped out of the turbolift. Kirk was startled to see a look of almost-shock cross Spock's face when he glanced up to see who had arrived.

"Practicing for a new career, Spock?" he asked cheerfully.

Spock looked confusedly at the console as though he had never seen it before, then he took out a tape and straightened up. "No, sir," he said, not looking at Kirk.

"Spock, is there something wrong?"

Spock drew in a deep breath, then seemed to change his mind. He looked at Kirk. "No, Captain. I was completing some work that needed to be done before we arrive at Earth."

Kirk nodded slowly. "I wish this mission wasn't ending. I wish it could go on forever." He smiled a little. "I guess that sounds silly. A year from now we'll probably be wishing we were back where we are now. You'll be fuming at me for not being logical, and I'll be ranting at Starfleet's stupidity...." His smile faded. "But some of us won't be back, Spock. The end of a mission changes everything. New people come, old friends go." He looked around the bridge. "For one thing, you won't be stuck with a juvenile Captain again. If nothing else, I'm older."

Pain swept through Spock as he stood looking at Kirk. He wished with all his heart that he still saw Kirk as he had that first day; young, impetuous, eager to learn - and a stranger.

"Well," said Kirk, "you've probably got some work to do. I know I have. Oh - McCoy's invited himself for a drink later. The invitation's open if you'd like to come."

For a moment Spock panicked, but he couldn't refuse without raising Kirk's suspicions. He had already stepped out-of-line with McCoy at dinner, and if the two of them started talking about him.... "Thank you, Captain, I would be honored."

"Good. Twenty minutes then, in my cabin."

Spock quickly left the bridge. On the way to his quarters the tape almost burned his hand as he thought how narrowly he had missed being discovered. The tape was a follow-up to his request that his resignation from Starfleet be accepted immediately. Reasons - personal.



"Goodness, Bones; I think this stuff must have been aging since the year one," said Kirk appreciatively as he swirled the brandy in his glass.

"A special bottle," nodded McCoy in agreement. "I've been saving it for a long time."

They were alone in Kirk's quarters. Spock had left a few minutes earlier, saying he had things to attend to. They had spent a pleasant hour discussing some of the funnier incidents that had happened to them over the years, incidents that had Kirk and McCoy often helpless with laughter; even Spock's mouth twitched occasionally over some of them.

"Well, Jim - to the end of an era," said McCoy, lifting his glass.

"And to the beginning of another," said Kirk, lifting his in answer. "Are you really going to go through all this again, Bones?"

"What, let you and that crazy Vulcan loose in space without me? You wouldn't last a week!" They laughed and drank, then McCoy put his glass on the table. "What if they offer you flag rank, Jim; would you be tempted to take it?"

Kirk looked at him in surprise. "Do you think I should, given the unlikely possibility that they do offer it?"

"Well, it would follow along the path of your meteoric rise - youngest Academy graduate, youngest commanding officer, youngest Captain, Starship rank...youngest Admiral?"

"Bones, I'm not even forty yet. There's plenty of time to be a desk-bound paper-pusher later. I am definitely not interested in setting any more records."

"You already have."

Kirk looked at him with a grin. "What have I done now?"

"You took over the *Enterprise* five years ago, and you're bringing the ship and crew home - intact."

"Not intact, Bones." The soul-deep exhaustion Kirk had been ignoring sounded in his voice. "Seventy-nine people have died."

McCoy frowned. "Jim, we're not here to discuss infallibility. I've done that enough times with you already. All I'm trying to point out is that you've come up with another first, and Starfleet is going to reward you like no other man has ever been rewarded."

"I can always say no."

"Yeah, well, I guess there's always that." He glanced up as Kirk rose. "Didn't mean to chase you away by turning serious."

"You didn't. I've got some things to do."

McCoy looked at him skeptically. "Well, make sure you get to bed sometime before tomorrow morning, okay?"

Kirk smiled. "That sounds like a doctor's order."

McCoy smiled back. "It is. See you in the morning."



Right on schedule, the *Enterprise* entered synchronous orbit over Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco.

"Orbit secure, Captain," said Sulu, locking the starship on an automatic orbital path.

"Fleet Command acknowledges our arrival, Captain," came Uhura's voice. "They have a relief crew standing by, ready to beam up."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Kirk. "Notify the transporter room, then start organizing the departure schedules."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk glanced up at McCoy. "Well, Bones, we made it."

McCoy nodded but didn't say anything. He looked around the bridge, savoring a last look at the familiar faces. He knew a lot of people wouldn't be here when they left orbit again. When he looked back, Spock had come to stand beside Kirk, as he had so very often over the past years. Together they were looking at the blue/white planet that dominated the viewscreen. McCoy smiled inwardly. As much as he fought with the Vulcan, that picture said it all. The strength of one lay with the other, and it always would.

The moment for contemplation was past. People who had been lost in their own thoughts turned to briefly neglected duties and the bridge once again hummed with efficiency. Kirk acknowledged a message from Admiral Nogura's office, accepting an invitation for him and his senior officers to attend a dinner that night.

"I trust none of you had prior engagements," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "If you have, I suggest you break them." He looked around. "Well, everything seems secure here. Mr. Sulu...." He was interrupted by a call from Scotty.

"Captain, could you come down to my office for a wee minute?"

"Problem, Scotty?"

"Well, sir, yes and no. I'd like you to have a look."

"All right, I'm on my way." He looked at Spock, who raised an eyebrow. "You have the con, Mr. Spock."

"Acknowledged."

As the turbolift doors closed behind Kirk, everyone on the bridge leapt to his feet.

"Mr. Spock, are you sure you don't mind?" asked Uhura, obviously barely able to contain herself.

"I assure you, Miss Uhura, I am perfectly capable of keeping the bridge secure during your absence."

With that, everyone - including McCoy - crowded into the turbolift. Until he had seen it done, Spock would have sworn that that many people wouldn't have fit. Within seconds he was standing alone on a deserted bridge. Shaking his head, he sat down at the helm, his eyes watchfully moving over the instruments. One person could man a starship in synchronous orbit, but it was a good idea to be alert, just in case.

Scotty happened to be walking past the turbolift doors just as Kirk stepped out. He was carrying some rolled-up plans in his hand.

"What's up, Scotty?"

"I dinna know, Captain. It's verra strange." Kirk fell into step beside him and they moved off down the corridor towards Scotty's office. Scotty launched into a technical explanation of an engine malfunction that had Kirk scrambling to keep up, and he didn't notice that they had passed Scotty's office and were heading for Rec Room

18 - the huge area where the ship's biggest functions were held.

They were deep in discussion as they went through the door, looking at the plans in Scotty's hand. The sudden cheering and clapping caught Kirk cold. He looked up in surprise to see a seething mass of humanity packed into the rec room, all sailing at him and applauding. He stopped dead, then looked at Scotty.

"An engine malfunction?"

Scotty grinned. "Aye, well...close enough."

Uhura stepped forward and a loud chorus of *ssshhh* ran through the large room. Kirk looked at McCoy, who was squeezed into the corner. The doctor grinned and winked. Kirk's expression told him he would get him later. Then his attention came back to Uhura, who had stopped in front of him.

"Captain," she said, her voice reaching to the back corners of the room, "there's no way this isn't going to sound corny; believe me, I've tried." She took a deep breath, then continued. "Sir, we would like to thank you for the past five years, for your inspiration, for your leadership. We've learned what the Federation truly stands for because of you. We've all grown because of our association with you...." Someone stepped forward with a large roll of paper and gave it to Uhura. "There's not much that travellers like ourselves can give each other, but our own special feelings. Captain, this scroll says what we feel about you..." She held it out to Kirk, who slowly took it. He looked around the rec room, his throat hurting as he held his emotions in check. So many people - some he knew well, others he knew not at all - but they all shared the same pride and love for their commanding officer. What had he ever done to deserve it?

"Go ahead, open it." Uhura's voice brought him back to reality.

As he broke the seal, one end of the scroll fell open and dropped to the floor, rolling several feet before it stopped. He glanced at the beautiful hand-printed script at the top of the scroll and felt himself turning red. Then he looked farther down; a picture of every crewmember was there, personally signed. Some people had written a small note; others, just their signatures.

"So you'll remember us, sir," said Uhura, her eyes bright with tears.

Kirk swallowed hard as he tried to find the right words to say, even though he realized that there weren't any. He gazed around the room, then cleared his throat and looked down again at the scroll in his hands. "Uh, I was set to deal with a malfunction, not with this," he said. Then he looked up. "I want to thank all of you for making the *Enterprise* the ship she has been. For those of you who are going on to other duties, my best wishes go with you..." He cleared his throat again. "And for those of you who are staying on, I want you back here in one piece, alert and sober!" There was laughter and applause. "Really," he continued, "I don't know what to say except.... thank you." He regarded the crowd in front of him. "Now, I think some of you had better get back on duty. I admit that the *Enterprise* is a good ship, but flying by herself is expecting a bit much." He grinned, then, rolling up the scroll, he turned and left before the fullness in his eyes overflowed into the tears that many others were already shedding.

The buzzer sounded and Kirk activated the lock as he ran over the list of names, the scroll lying open over his desk and piled on the floor on either side. McCoy walked in, his face split by a huge grin.

"Gotcha, didn't we?"

"Bones, if I ever get hold of the instigator of this little do, his name will be mud!"

"Sure, sure." McCoy glanced at the scroll. "I've never heard of anything like this happening on a ship before, Jim. Some groups might get together, but, barring yourself, everyone aboard the *Enterprise* is represented on that thing. That should tell you something about yourself."

"Yeah, everyone was too scared not to." He looked at the top of the scroll. "That's a good picture of you, Bones."

"Had it doctored specially," said McCoy with a grin. He looked closely at Kirk. "Did you go to bed at all last night?"

A sheepish look crossed Kirk's face. "Well, I was going to..."

"Jim, when are you going to realize you're only Human? The next few weeks are going to be pretty draining, and starting out exhausted isn't going to help."

"Bones, I've been tired for so long I've forgotten what it's like to feel normal." He picked up the scroll and started to reroll it.

McCoy watched him, a hint of worry on his face. Sometime in the next few weeks Kirk would have to let go. He only hoped that their duties at Starfleet would be long over by then, and Kirk could peacefully collapse on R & R.



"Do you realize how often we're going to be stuck in these things over the next several weeks?" groaned McCoy as he pulled at the neck of his dress uniform.

"But think of the good food that goes with it," replied Kirk with a grin. "Not one thing in that entire dinner was reconstituted."

"Indeed," agreed Spock. "Even the plooeeek soup was superior."

"Well, well," said McCoy. "We finally got a word out of our First Officer."

Kirk looked at Spock. "You were unusually quiet tonight, Spock."

"The good doctor was doing an admirable job of monopolizing the conversation, sir. I did not feel it necessary to fight for a chance to make an observation." The tone of Spock's voice stopped either Kirk or McCoy from commenting further. They glanced at each other, surprised at Spock's somewhat acid comment. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen," continued Spock, "I have a few things to attend to." He nodded formally and walked away.

"Something's bothering him, Jie," said McCoy thoughtfully. "He's been acting a bit strangely recently."

"Probably the same thing that's bothering all of us, Bones," said Kirk. "We're tired, we've come to the end of the mission. Change is unsettling at the best of times, and you know how Spock likes routine. He's really only happy when he's far away from the complications of things like this."

"Yeah, I hope that's all this is. Well, I need some sleep. Unlike the two of you, I'm long past the age where I can go for weeks before I collapse. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Bones."

Kirk went to his quarters to change, then started on his usual nightly tour of his ship - the last tour he would take for some months. Where he met crewmen at work he stopped and talked for a few minutes before moving on. It was well past midnight, ship's time, before he got back to his own quarters. Tomorrow he would be leaving her to go planetside. By then the *Enterprise* would be swarming with technicians stripping her down; refurbishing, refitting, and giving her a general overhaul.

Nearly he flopped down onto his bed, not bothering to undress. He didn't feel much like sleeping. He was too tired, for one thing, and he had conflicting emotions over the ending of a very important phase of his life. For an hour he lay in the dark silence, then finally gave up on the idea of sleep. He got up and headed determinedly for the door. There was one place he would be at peace - and it wasn't here.

The bridge was dark as he stepped out of the turbolift. He didn't bother switching on the lights, but stepped down to the helm console and activated the viewscreen. Then he moved to the command chair and stared at the beautiful planet below him, and at the stars in the black velvet background of space. As he sat there he thought of the planets that surrounded those stars, and the many things that had happened as the *Enterprise* had made her way among them. It was a life he loved, a life he never wanted to end.



"Jie?" A gentle hand shook him awake. Kirk grunted and straightened up. Spock was standing beside the command chair, his eyes showing some concern. Kirk looked at the chronometer, then back at Spock.

"You're up early," he said quietly. The chronometer showed him that he had been asleep for about four hours.

"I had a few things to run through the computer," Spock replied. Kirk looked at him thoughtfully. As soon as he had opened his eyes he was conscious that Spock had withdrawn. He wondered again what was wrong. The friend he had come to know was getting hard to find. All that made Spock special was starting to submerge back into the stolid Vulcan. Kirk realized suddenly that it had been happening for the past several months, and he didn't know why. He got to his feet a bit stiffly and stretched.

"Ohh - command chairs are not built to sleep in." He looked at Spock. "I'd better go finish packing. You, I assume, are all set to go?"

"Affirmative."

"I hate organized people. See you later."

Spock watched him leave, a growing tightness in his chest. He was more packed than Kirk realized. He had only to wait until he received a reply to the request he had sent to Starfleet three months ago, and then...

He slowly turned to his console. And then he would have to face Kirk, and every minute of every day he dreaded that moment. But every time he was near Kirk he realized that he had made the only decision possible. Months of agonizing had ended, and many things would change. He would only be one of them.

"You're looking a little dishevelled, Jie," said McCoy, after the two of them had almost collided at the turbolift. "What on earth have you been doing?"

"Sleeping on the bridge. Have you had breakfast yet?"

McCoy shook his head. "I was just on my way."

"Good. I'll join you."

It didn't take Kirk very long to finish packing once he got started. He put aside one small suitcase to take with him. His other belongings, stored in air crates, could stay onboard. The crew's quarters were last on the

list to be overhauled. By the time technicians got to them, Kirk would be based somewhere on Earth, and he could have his belongings transported there.

Finally, he could put off the inevitable no longer. The chronometer crept relentlessly forward towards the departure time. He looked around his cabin one last time. He frowned a little. This, too, would be greatly changed when he got back. Progress brought change - change was inevitable, but, like Spock, he admitted that he wasn't comfortable with it. Someone would take his lady in his absence and change her, make her different from what she had been - and she was perfect now. The commanding tone of the buzzer broke into his thoughts and he turned towards the door.

"Come."

McCoy walked in, eyeing the ordered mess of Kirk's quarters. "Amazing how much junk you can get in a small area, isn't it?"

Kirk laughed. He had had the exact same thought as he was packing. "You ready to go?"

"Yup." McCoy's eyes were fixed on Kirk. "I thought maybe you'd like some company."

Kirk appreciated McCoy's concern. In a way, he had been dreading this last walk down the corridors to the transporter room. It wasn't that he couldn't come back aboard the *Enterprise*; he could, any time he wanted to. But for a while at least, she wouldn't be his.

"Well, I guess I'm ready. We can pick up Spock on the way."

McCoy's eyes narrowed. "Spock's already gone, Jim."

"Gone? When?"

"About an hour ago. I just happened to be checking to make sure the transporter was working properly when he came in. He didn't say much, then he was gone." McCoy shifted uncomfortably under Kirk's gaze. "Oh, the transporter's working fine."

A small smile didn't quite blot out the bleak look in Kirk's eyes. "Well, he probably had something he had to do planetside. Come on, let's go."

As they made their way to the transporter room McCoy silently cursed Spock. For no reason he could fathom, Spock had elected to desert Kirk at a moment when he needed him the most. The Vulcan had lived with Humans long enough to be aware of their feelings - and he certainly knew Kirk well enough to know that this moment would be a difficult one, where he would need those few people he was close to. And the one who was closest to him, who meant the most to him, was the one who had failed him now.

Only Scotty was in the transporter room when they arrived. He knew the emotions that would be ripping through his commanding officer, so had sent the technician away on a minor errand.

"I take it you'll be supervising the engine refitting, Scotty," said Kirk with a grin.

"Aye, sir," said Scotty. "I'm nae letting strangers foul up my wee bairns. But I'll be at the debriefing, right enough."

"Good. We'll see you there." He glanced at McCoy. "Ready, Doctor?"

McCoy visibly straightened. "The only thing I like about this is that it's going to be weeks before I am forced to risk my molecules going through one of these things again!" He noted with relief that his grumbling had struck the chord he had hoped it would, and Kirk got on the platform, laughing.

"All right, Scotty," he said, still chuckling. "Energize - carefully!"



The next weeks kept them all too busy to think. Endless meetings followed the debriefing periods, and those in turn were followed by a round of dinner parties, award ceremonies, and a general showing-off of the latest Federation heroes. Through it all Spock remained aloof and strangely reticent - a Vulcan among Humans. At first Kirk tried to break through, but he soon gave up. Spock would explain his actions in his own time, and Kirk was too busy to worry about anything other than his own problems.

McCoy watched them both, his worry increasing. Spock had withdrawn into a place where no one could follow. He ignored all of McCoy's attempts to talk with him until finally McCoy lost his temper. They had just finished their final, exhausting debriefing session, and they were all tired and on edge.

"Come on," said Kirk. "This calls for a celebration, before I fall flat on my face. Let's find a quiet place to eat."

"I'm with you, Jim," said McCoy.

"I shall take my leave, gentlemen," said Spock quietly. "I have...." He broke off at the look on McCoy's face.

"Jim," said McCoy, "you go ahead. Get us a table at that little restaurant you like so much. I'll be right there."

For a moment Kirk looked at them, then he nodded and left. McCoy exhaled heavily; for a brief moment he had thought that Kirk meant to stay to find out what was going on, and he was just as happy he hadn't. He was about to vent the entire strength of his anger on the Vulcan. He waited until Kirk was out of sight, then wheeled on Spock.

"All right, I want an explanation!"

"Of what?" Spock's face was a blank.

"Of why you are trying to destroy that man - your best friend!"

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly at the word McCoy used. "I assure you, Doctor, I am not trying to destroy anyone."

"Now look, Spock, Jim needs...."

"The Captain needs a friend at his side, Doctor, someone who understands what he is going through and can give him the support he needs...."

"Right!" Suddenly McCoy felt uneasy. Spock was giving him the argument he had been going to give the Vulcan.

"He needs someone who can stand by him in the days and weeks ahead, until the mental and physical exhaustion of this mission is gone...."

McCoy nodded. "He needs that someone badly."

"At the moment, he is holding himself together by sheer power of will," said Spock, hardly noticing McCoy's interruption. "One day, soon, he will come to the end of his reserves, and he will be open and vulnerable to anything that happens."

McCoy looked at him speculatively. "All right, Spock, I concede your analysis is flawless. That still doesn't explain your actions, or excuse them."

Spock looked down the empty street, and McCoy saw a muscle quiver along the Vulcan's jawline - a small movement that shrieked out Spock's struggle for control. He reached forward and put his hand on Spock's arm.

"Spock, what's...."

Spock pulled away as though McCoy had imparted an electrical shock. Then their eyes met, worry in McCoy's, a hint of desperation in Spock's.

"Doctor, Jim needs you. Please go to him, stay with him. I...I am not able...." Abruptly he turned and practically fled down the street, leaving McCoy gaping after him. This was certainly not the conversation, nor the reaction he had expected.

Kirk was nursing a drink by the time McCoy got to the restaurant. He stopped at the bar and got one for himself, then went over to the table and sat down.

"You two settle your differences?"

McCoy took a swallow of his drink, then looked at him. "Were we fighting?"

"Reprimand noted," said Kirk with a slight smile. He looked around the darkened room. "He wouldn't come, I take it."

For a moment McCoy hesitated. Should he tell Kirk what had happened? Spock's strange behavior was already worrying Kirk badly, and McCoy decided that now would not be a good time to add to those worries. "He had a meeting to go to. I guess Vulcans really don't get as tired as Humans. I couldn't go to a meeting now even if it was to discover that my old maiden aunt had left me a billion credits."

"I know what you mean," agreed Kirk.

They placed their orders. The food came quickly and they ate in silence, enjoying the meal but too tired to carry on the conversation. After a short walk they returned to their temporary quarters at Starfleet Headquarters and turned in early. Kirk had a meeting with Fleet Command in the morning, to be followed by a lunch with Admiral Nogura. McCoy had a conference with the Surgeon General, then would meet with the medical technicians and engineers to start redesigning sections of the Sickbay.



"Finding your land legs again, Jim?" asked Nogura as they left the large conference room on their way to lunch.

"I rather miss being knocked on my behind every now and then, sir. It keeps you honest."

"Oh, that wears off after a while." They walked down the hallway to Nogura's office. "Come on in for a minute."

The thick carpet sank beneath Kirk's feet as he walked across the room. The armchair folded around him comfortably.

"Nice, isn't it?"

Kirk looked around him. "A man could grow to like this sort of thing."

Nogura looked at him closely, wondering how much of that statement was merely complimentary, and how much was the truth.

"Jim," he said seriously, "I've got a problem I'd like you to help me with." Nogura smiled a little as interest lit up Kirk's tired eyes. "We're starting what I guess you could call a publicity push. I'm sure you're aware of the ongoing problem - those that aren't in the service don't understand it, and they are the ones with the loudest voices...."

"Where do I come in?"

"There's a forum tomorrow night, focusing on the many careers that Starfleet offers. I'd like you to be on the panel."

"What am I supposed to talk about?"

"Easy - just talk about yourself."

For a moment Kirk looked like he was about to object, then he smiled. "I guess it won't be too difficult. That's all I've been doing for the past couple of weeks."

"Good," said Nogura. "Let's go get some lunch, shall we?"



The huge hall was jammed with thousands of people. Kirk looked down the table at the three other people who were also representing Starfleet in some capacity. From what Commodore Dennat had told him, these forums were normally sparsely attended. This was a record-breaking crowd.

There was a reason for it, and that reason was James T. Kirk. San Francisco was now a 'military' town. Almost everyone who lived in the area had ties with Starfleet in one way or another. And because of that connection they had heard of Kirk, and heard that he would speak here tonight.

And speak he did. He kept the great hall absolutely spellbound for over an hour. He had no prepared speech, he used no notes; he simply talked about how Starfleet had affected and changed his life. Then, for almost two hours, he fielded questions from the audience until someone finally rescued him, and he left to a standing ovation.

McCoy met him at the edge of the stage. "Damn it, Jim, you really have taken the wrong job. You should be a recruiter!" Nogura, standing at McCoy's side, looked at Kirk thoughtfully. Kirk was the man he needed. Standing in front of the auditorium, resplendent in his dress uniform, the lights glinting off his medals, he was the stuff of which legends were made. And the fact that his deeds had already made him a legend didn't hurt. It was then that Nogura knew he couldn't afford to let Kirk go back into space. But it was going to be difficult to stop him. He had known Kirk since he was a junior lieutenant. He knew the iron will that drove the man, but Nogura wasn't Commanding Admiral for nothing. His will was stronger.

Nogura, Kirk, and McCoy made their way to the back of the darkened room. This was the exclusive officers' club at Starfleet Headquarters. Even though the so-called 'forum' had only been over for a short time - so-called because the other three members of the panel had not had a chance to say anything - the word of Kirk's impact had spread. Many people stopped to congratulate him, and it took them a while to get to Nogura's personal table. Even after they were seated, people kept coming by.

Finally they were alone. McCoy nursed his drink, keeping a concerned eye on Kirk, who was uncharacteristically slumped in his chair. *He needs to get away from here,* thought McCoy to himself. *He's held up better than I thought he would, but he's finally worn out.* Nogura's voice broke into his thoughts.

"You really were impressive tonight, Jim."

"I know," said Kirk with a tired smile, "I'm so full of bullshit my eyes are brown."

Nogura looked down at his drink. "You're a valuable man, almost irreplaceable." He glanced up at Kirk. "I don't think I can afford to lose you."

"Heihachiro, I'm not about to defect, you know."

"You are, in a way."

Kirk straightened up. "How?"

"By taking a second mission." McCoy's ears pricked up, and he shot a warning look at Kirk, but Kirk's attention was riveted on Nogura. "Jim, Sparte's retiring in a couple of months. I need a new chief of operations. I'm talking about flag rank. Think about it - Admiral Kirk, youngest in history."

Kirk's eyes flicked over to McCoy, remembering the conversation they had had. Then he looked back at Nogura. "I'm not interested, Admiral." His eyes were cold and hard.

Nogura looked at McCoy for a moment, noting the concern and alarm on his face, then he looked back at Kirk. "I can't force you to accept a promotion, but...."

"But you can make it difficult to say no."

Nogura didn't answer. He finished his drink, then got up. "Think about it, Jim. Don't give me your answer right away. Weigh the pros and cons. If you look at this objectively, I think you'll find my offer is the better of the two. You were a brilliant commanding officer, but that part of your life is past. Even if you go out again,

it won't be the same...."

"You sound like you're writing me off." Kirk didn't try to keep the challenge out of his voice.

Nogura shook his head. "I am pointing out your value. There is only one of you. There are others who can command a starship, but there is only one James T. Kirk. Starfleet needs you badly, needs your knowledge, your experience. I have a staff of good people, but none of them can match you." He started to leave, then turned back to Kirk. "I'm asking this personally, Jim, as Heihachiro, not as Admiral Nogura." Their eyes met, then Nogura turned and walked away.

For a long time Kirk and McCoy sat in silence, then McCoy leaned forward and caught the waiter's attention. They placed their orders, and McCoy leaned back in his chair. "Deja vu?"

Kirk looked at him soberly. "Did I give you the right answer then?"

"What, that you could always say no?"

Kirk nodded. "A simple word, but not one he'll accept easily, Bones. That was quite a package he threw - flag rank, chief of operations...."

"And he also said he didn't want an answer right away," said McCoy hastily.

"Of course he didn't. He knew damn well what my answer was going to be. He's hoping if he stalls for time, he'll find a way of getting the answer he wants."

"Could that answer be yes?"

Kirk sighed. "I don't know, Bones. A few weeks ago, far away from this place, the answer was very clear. But I've seen a lot since we got back, talked to a lot of people. I've seen what needs to be done, and I've seen people who are incapable of doing it."

McCoy shook his head. "You're on the wrong track, Jim. A man of action does not belong planetside. Aboard ship, you're the decision-maker. Here you'd be part of a chain of command, and very often that chain is ineffective, without any clout. It wouldn't work."

Kirk stared at his drink. "But there wouldn't be any more life-or-death decisions. Seventy-nine men wouldn't be dead because of me...."

"Jim, for pete's sake, stop condemning yourself for being the best damn Captain in the entire fleet! You know full well...."

"That I'm not responsible for their deaths," Kirk finished for him. He looked up at McCoy, a tiny smile on his face. "I know, Bones. I guess I'm just too tired to think straight anymore."

"Which is why you shouldn't be in a hurry to make a decision on this. Tired men do foolish things. I've heard you say that a hundred times, and you accuse me of using quaint philosophy. Come on," he said as he got to his feet, "let's get to bed."



McCoy had planned to check on Kirk the next morning, but was waylaid by some old medical friends. When he got back in the late afternoon there was no answer to his knock. He did some checking around, but no one had seen Kirk. Getting worried, he placed a call to Spock's quarters.

"I'm sorry, sir. Those quarters are now vacant."

"Vacant?" McCoy couldn't hide his surprise. "Uh, could you tell me where I could contact Commander Spock?"

The answer was negative. McCoy switched off the intercom. What was going on? Where was everybody?

It was close to midnight when the knock came. McCoy pulled on his robe over his pajamas and unlocked the door.

Kirk was standing there, along with a rather attractive woman. The stripes on her uniform showed her to be an Admiral, but not someone McCoy knew. Kirk looked at him in surprise.

"I'm sorry, Bones, I didn't realize that it was so late."

"That's okay, I was just reading. Come on in."

"Jim, I think I'd better go." The woman drew away. "I'll see you in the morning." She nodded to McCoy and left. Kirk seemed oblivious to the fact that she was no longer there. He walked in and turned to face McCoy.

"Where were you earlier?" His voice sounded strained, as though he was fighting to keep his emotions in check.

"I was out with friends. Why?"

"Out with friends," said Kirk bitterly. "And where were my friends when I needed them?"

McCoy walked over to Kirk. "Jim, what's wrong?"

"You weren't here."

"Damn it, I can't always be. And what's this nonsense about no friends? Spock was here...."

Kirk abruptly turned away and walked over to the window, looking out into the night. "Spock's gone, Bones."

For a moment McCoy stood speechless. "What do you mean, 'gone'?"

"Just that. Gone, vamoosed, kaput. Vanished forever." He turned and looked at McCoy. "I thought you would

be pleased to hear it, Doctor. Now you won't have a Vulcan around to complicate your life anymore."

McCoy stared at him. "Jim, I think you'd better sit down and tell me this thing from the beginning." He poured himself a drink and brought one for Kirk, but it went untouched and unnoticed.

"You think you know someone, Bones," he said quietly, "but you never really do." He sat down and, for a moment, held his face in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees, then looked up. "Spock has left Starfleet, or, rather, he had been placed on the inactive list. They wouldn't let him resign."

McCoy knew his astonishment was showing on his face. "Why? When?"

Kirk smiled slightly. "When? He submitted his resignation three months ago. He left for Vulcan this morning."

"Damn, Jim, you could have told me...."

Kirk shot to his feet. "I ~~am~~ telling you! I tried to tell you this morning after he told me - after he had brought my life crashing down around my ears - but I couldn't. You weren't here!" Kirk turned sharply, visibly shaken by anger and despair.

Suddenly McCoy remembered that morning back on the *Enterprise* when Spock had been questioning him so closely about what his plans were. And he remembered the conversation they had had after the final debriefing. "Doctor, Jim needs you. Go to him, stay with him...I ~~am~~ not able..." But even after all of Spock's warnings, he hadn't been there when Kirk had needed him most.

As he thought about it, he realized that all the strange behavior Spock had been exhibiting must have started when he sent his request to Starfleet. Why had he done it?

"Why?"

Kirk shook his head. "I tried to find out. I asked, I pleaded, I even ordered, but all he said was he had to go." He moved away from McCoy, his body trembling a little as he fought to contain his raging emotions. "Then I lost my temper, and I watched him icy formality for icy formality. Bones, I didn't say anything I'd regret, I didn't say anything! And now he's gone. He walked away and he didn't turn back once...."

McCoy cringed at the mental picture Kirk was painting. He could only imagine the terrible hurt of that moment.

"So, I came here, only you were gone. I wandered around for a bit, then tried to get drunk." He laughed. "It didn't work. I came back, but you still weren't here. That's when I ran into Lori."

"Lori?"

"Admiral Ciani." Kirk looked around, noticing for the first time that she wasn't there.

"Oh, she said she had to go," explained McCoy.

Kirk nodded. "I had met her a couple of times before, and I needed a shoulder to cry on."

McCoy cursed silently. Because of his inability to see what was going on under his nose, Kirk had been forced to turn to a virtual stranger.

"She seemed to understand. Anyway, she was sympathetic...." Suddenly Kirk's shoulders started to shake. "God, Bones, what am I going to do without him?"

"Come on, Jim, you'd better get to bed."

Kirk straightened abruptly. "No, I don't want to be alone, not now."

McCoy looked at the drained and exhausted man. "All right, but at least drink your drink."

For hours they sat, McCoy nursing a drink while Kirk completely ignored his. He had nothing he could offer Kirk, he could do nothing to ease the pain. Only time could help, and even that might not be enough.

McCoy found himself cursing Spock. The Vulcan had known how exhausted Kirk had been. He should have known how his defection - for it could be called nothing else - would have affected Kirk. Yet he had done it anyway. *You always put yourself first, don't you Spock? Other people's feelings don't matter when it's your life in the balance. What kind of fool trip are you on this time?* Then he chided himself. That wasn't being fair. Almost always Spock put Kirk first. Why not this time?

Dawn slowly broke. McCoy got up and made them both some coffee. Kirk took his with a grateful look and downed the steaming brew.

"I think Lori's right, Bones."

"Right about what?"

"Accepting flag rank."

A red alert went off in McCoy's brain. Suddenly he remembered where he had seen her name before. Vice Admiral Ciani, one of Nogura's personal staff. He put his cup down carefully. "Jim, this is a decision you shouldn't make hastily, especially not now. Wait until you've had a rest, until you can be more objective about it." *And until I can get you out of here, away from Nogura's clutches!* He got up. "Come on, you've got to get some sleep. I just happen to have some nice little red pills that will help you to forget everything...." Fifteen minutes later Kirk was dead to the world, asleep in McCoy's bed, and McCoy was busy packing.

After he finished, McCoy checked on Kirk, assuring himself that he would be asleep for some hours yet, then headed for the main teleport. He was going to have to work fast. The fact that Kirk had just 'happened' to run into Lori Ciani told McCoy that Nogura was already at work. Heaven only knew how long Nogura had known about Spock's decision to leave Starfleet. Probably not long, otherwise he would have used that information as a lever to get Kirk to accept the promotion to flag rank. But now that he knew, he was going to use it as a hammer, if necessary - perhaps covered by a velvet glove, in the form of Lori, but a hammer nonetheless.

McCoy had to get Kirk's file to the medical board as soon as possible. He wanted them to be fully aware of who Kirk was and what drove him before they met face to face at a board hearing, in the unlikely - McCoy hoped - event that Kirk accepted Nogura's offer. McCoy had not had all that much to do with Starfleet hierarchy, but he knew the medical branch backwards. They would see in Kirk's profile exactly what McCoy saw, and he knew their recommendation would be against promotion. And surely the top brass would not deliberately destroy a man just to assuage their own egos!

He beamed up to the *Enterprise* with a group of workmen. He probably would have been able to get what he wanted at Starfleet, but he didn't want some nosey busybody starting an alarm. This fight would be best fought on the sly. He was only one man against a machine, so he had to be very careful.

The Sickbay was a mess. Only a few days had passed since he had gone over the final changes he wanted with the engineers, and already the work was going ahead at full speed. McCoy had to admit to himself that he was impressed.

He went to the large medical computer and punched in his request. Within minutes he was on his way again, the computer tape in his pocket containing all the information he needed. A half hour later he was in conference with Dory Tallen, chief of the medical board, and a man McCoy knew did not bow under pressure.

Kirk was still asleep when McCoy got back. He left him again and went to Kirk's quarters. He would get his stuff packed, and then they were getting out of here. Kirk needed time to recover, time to adjust to the fact that Spock was no longer part of his life, and time to realize that he wanted to go back into space. The problem was that all those things needed that 'magic' time, and McCoy didn't know if Kirk would be allowed enough of it.

He had almost finished when the buzzer rang. For a moment he hesitated, unsure if he should answer, not wanting to be interrupted in his plan of escape. But after the buzzer rang several more times he shut the suitcase and slung it under the bed, then went to see who it was.

"Admiral Ciani."

For a moment the woman seemed a bit startled to see him, then a warm smile crossed her face. McCoy could see why Kirk had been attracted to her. She was attractive and friendly - and obviously available.

"Good morning." Her eyes quickly looked him over, then returned to his face. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage."

McCoy's ever-present Southern chivalry charged to the surface. "Excuse me, I guess we didn't meet very officially last night. I'm Leonard McCoy."

Her smile widened. "Of course, you're the CMO of the *Enterprise*. I should have guessed. Jim talked about you a lot yesterday." She looked past McCoy. "Is he here? I told him I would be free today."

"Uh, no," said McCoy truthfully. "And it doesn't look as though his bed's been slept in." He stepped back to let her in. A quick glance told her he was telling the truth.

"I wonder where he went?" she said thoughtfully. "How long did he stay with you?"

"Oh, uh, we sat up all night, then I had a few things to do. I haven't heard a word from him." McCoy found himself rather enjoying this. It was amazing how the truth could be stretched. "I came over here to see if maybe he had taken my advice to get some sleep...." He waved a hand at the bed. "You can see how he usually follows my advice."

Lori nodded, a bit preoccupied. "Well, if you do see him, will you tell him I stopped by? I'll be in my office if he wants to call."

"I'll be sure to tell him," said McCoy with a smile, crushing the urge to look at the chronometer. Kirk would be waking up soon, and McCoy wanted Lori Ciani long gone when he did.

After another uncertain glance around the room, Lori left. McCoy grabbed the suitcase from under the bed and finished packing Kirk's things, then he headed back for his own quarters. He was just closing the door when Kirk appeared from the bedroom.

"You look like hell," said McCoy kindly.

"I feel like it." Kirk looked at the suitcase McCoy put down. "Am I going somewhere?"

"We are going to Atlanta for some R & R. I don't know if you remember what sort of shape you were in last night, but I'm going to do something about it. You have anything you're supposed to do here?"

Kirk shook his head. "Everything ended yesterday." His eyes hardened. "Really ended," he added quietly.

McCoy ignored the last comment. "Then have a shower and get dressed. We can have coffee on the shuttle, and lunch when we get to Atlanta."

"Bones, do you think...."

"No arguments," said McCoy crisply. "I am still your medical officer, and what I say goes. Now get moving!"

For a moment Kirk hesitated and McCoy thought that he was in for an argument, but then he turned and went back into the bedroom. McCoy called transportation and arranged for a rental shuttle, then called to say their rooms would be vacated by noon. He would contact Fleet Command after they got to Atlanta, to inform them that he had ordered Kirk on medical rest leave. Wogura could try to bring the wrath of his office down on his head, but McCoy knew he had regulations on his side, even if the procedure was a bit unorthodox.



"So this is what you call home," said Kirk with a smile. "Bones, it looks just like you."

McCoy laughed. It had been a number of years since he had been back to his boyhood home. This place did not hold the unhappy memories of the years he had spent with Ariana. This was the house he had grown up in, the house he had shared with his father. The white clapboard house was surrounded by large magnolia trees. Black shutters bordered the large, open windows, and lacy white curtains blew gently with the warm breeze.

"This is home. The Bennetts normally live here - I guess they'd probably be second cousins - but they're on vacation. They said they'd leave things ready, and to help ourselves."

"Well, I guess you couldn't have brought me farther away from Starfleet's influence than this," said Kirk as he picked up his suitcase.

"Are you mad that I did?"

For a moment their eyes held, then Kirk looked away at the peaceful scene. "I don't think it matters much anymore, Bones. Nothing does."

McCoy frowned. Not so very long ago Spock had said that Kirk would soon come to the end of his reserve of strength, and would be open and vulnerable. And Spock had chosen that exact moment for his crushing blow - a blow from which Kirk might never fully recover. Again he felt a surge of anger. He would never understand why Spock had done it. It seemed almost a deliberate, calculated attack.

They got themselves settled, then McCoy went to inform Starfleet where they could be reached if the need arose. At first he had hesitated, tempted to leave that information unknown so that there would be no chance of Starfleet butting in at the wrong moment, but then his conscience prevailed. It had been irregular enough, leaving as they had; he had better not push his luck any further.

Over the next few days Kirk did not exactly fall to pieces, but his mental and physical state was not good. The pressures of the past years, the emotional upheaval brought on by the end of the mission, and then Spock's leaving had all done their part in trying to destroy him.

That they hadn't showed the stuff that Kirk was made of, that rare quality shared by only a few others in Starfleet, also of command rank. He would bounce back, as he had bounced back all those other times, but there would be a difference.

He would not have his alter ego - he would not have Spock. McCoy knew that if Spock had been killed somewhere out there during the mission, somehow Kirk would have found the strength to go on. He would have found it because Spock would not have wanted him to quit. And he would have had to go on because he had his crew, he was responsible for them, and, above all, he would have had his ship. He would have had the *Enterprise*.

But now he had nothing, only McCoy, and the doctor knew that in the emotionally drained state Kirk was in now, it wouldn't be enough.

During this time he rarely left Kirk alone. They spent most days exploring Atlanta, still a city of Southern charm and elegance. Never did they mention Starfleet, never did Kirk mention Spock, and he would quickly change the subject any time that McCoy did. They went out for dinner almost every night, either to old friends of McCoy's or to one of the many small restaurants that dotted the city.

Gradually Kirk came out of his lethargy and depression, and became more the man McCoy knew. He charmed everyone he met, leaving McCoy laughing at the number of mothers who were hurriedly dragging their daughters to McCoy's door. Kirk was genuinely astonished when McCoy told him the real reason why he was suddenly giving so many unexpected tea parties. And that knowledge seemed to give Kirk a bit more confidence in himself. McCoy finally warned him to watch it; he wasn't ready to be father of the bride, and he didn't want to participate in any shotgun weddings.

They stayed in Atlanta for three weeks. Starfleet had acknowledged McCoy's report as to where they could be found, but had made no attempt to contact them. At first McCoy had been a little concerned. He knew that Wogura was aware that he would try to talk Kirk out of accepting the Admiral's offer of promotion, and by now he would be aware that McCoy had already contacted the medical board, yet he still bided his time. What did Wogura know that he

didn't?

They had just finished a rare dinner alone at home and were sitting on the grass under one of the magnolia trees, watching the lightening bugs that were spotting the dusky twilight. McCoy was sipping a mint julep, Kirk a cup of coffee. McCoy had tried to get Kirk to like his favorite drink, but to no avail. The doctor had always been impressed by the small amount Kirk actually drank. It was unusual in the service. It wasn't that Kirk didn't like or appreciate good liquor, it was just that he didn't like to have anything cause him to lose control of himself. In all the years McCoy had known Kirk, he couldn't remember ever seeing him uncontrollably drunk. Again, it said something about the man.

For a long time they sat in silence, enjoying the peace of the moment. McCoy found himself nodding off, then Kirk's voice jolted him back to full awareness.

"I'm going back tomorrow."

McCoy felt his spine prick. The tone of Kirk's voice told him a decision had been made. He took a swallow of his drink, not really wanting to know what that decision was. "It's about time," he said carefully. "This rest has done its bit. It's time to start thinking about the *Enterprise* again."

"I'm not taking her out, Bones. That part of my life is over, finished. I've had enough of space, of the uncertainties, the unknown - of death. I'm tired of being hurt, I'm tired of life-and-death decisions. I don't want that sort of responsibility anymore. Let someone else do it, someone who has the arrogant confidence of a god, like I used to have. That man should have the *Enterprise*, not me."

McCoy looked at him closely. Never once did Kirk look at him, never once did he lift his eyes from his coffee cup. He spoke in a monotone, no emotion reflected in his voice at all.

"You're making a big mistake, Jim."

"It's my life...."

"Which I care about enough to try to stop you from destroying it, even if you don't care anymore!" said McCoy angrily. He took a moment to put a tight clamp on himself, then looked at Kirk again. "May I ask why?"

Kirk sighed. "Does it matter?" He finally looked at McCoy. "Because I can be useful. Nogura had a staff full of old crocks and men who have never had the experience. I'll be chief of operations, Bones. Do you have any idea what that means? Do you remember all those times I threw a fit because of the hopelessly stupid orders we'd get from Starfleet Command? Of the stupidity and ineffectiveness of deployment? I can do away with all that. I've been there, I know what needs to be done."

"You sound like a recruiting pamphlet," said McCoy, with more sarcasm than he had intended.

Kirk got up, furious. "I seem to remember you saying that should be my line of work, Doctor, rather than trying to run a starship!"

"Damn it, Jim, I said nothing of the sort...." But Kirk had gone, striding angrily back to the house. McCoy slowly leaned back against the tree, his momentary anger quickly changing to sadness. Kirk was about to throw away his life and McCoy was fairly certain there would be nothing he could say or do to stop it - but he was as sure as hell going to try!

The flight to San Francisco passed in silence. Kirk was still angry, and McCoy, after a sleepless night, was too tired to start the argument again. But as soon as they arrived he made an appointment with Dory Tallar. He was going to need all the support he could get to go up against Nogura's iron will.

McCoy found the entire medical board waiting in Tallar's office. He stated his case as well as he could, knowing that these men understood the drives he was talking about. They knew that some men, completely competent in one job, were totally unsuited for another. To a man, they gave McCoy their word that they would give him their complete backing. Relieved, McCoy headed for his temporary quarters.

"Why, if it isn't Dr. McCoy!" McCoy turned to see Lori Ciani walking behind him. "I thought you were still on vacation, Doctor. Did you have a good time?"

McCoy made some noncommittal comment. He still had a lot to do, and he didn't have time to stand here making polite conversation. Lori looked at him, a little puzzled.

"Well, at least Jim got back in time to hear the good news personally."

"What good news?"

"He's getting his admiral's stars."

McCoy felt like the floor had just dropped out from underneath him. "When did it come through?" he asked in a strained voice.

Lori smiled. "Oh, it's not official yet, but it's just a matter of days...." She stared in astonishment as McCoy hastily excused himself and ran off down the corridor.

The race was on. He had to get to as many people as he could, he had to make them see reason. It was no use

going to Kirk. The argument they had had their last night in Atlanta told him that Kirk wasn't in any shape to see reason. And, because of that, he was ripe to be plucked and moulded into Nogura's image. McCoy was the only one standing between Kirk and disaster.

However, he wasn't alone. Half of the medical department at Starfleet Headquarters was with him, and they would do their best - but it wasn't enough. Finally there was only one person left. McCoy made an appointment to see Heihachiro Nogura, Commanding Admiral - and the reason for this mess.

And, to his credit, Nogura listened very carefully to what McCoy had to say. The few questions he asked were well thought-out and pertinent. Finally McCoy was silent. He only hoped Nogura cared more for the man than he did for the organization.

Nogura was quiet for a few minutes, then he looked at McCoy. "I appreciate your coming to see me, Doctor, and stating your concern about Captain Kirk. I would not want to force him into something he's not ready for. However," he said, getting to his feet, "I cannot deny his qualifications, the ideas he has come up with for the job, or his obvious willingness to be 'kicked upstairs', as you so quaintly put it. I will make my final decision soon. Thank you."

McCoy slowly got to his feet. He had done his best. Now it was up to God and destiny.



He was in the bathroom shaving when the knock came. He muttered under his breath as he walked into the main room and activated the lock. Kirk was standing in the doorway.

"May I come in?"

For a moment, McCoy remembered the silent anger they had last shared. Then, shaking his head slightly at the stupidity of it, he smiled. "Sure, come on."

He finished shaving, then came back out. "You here for any particular reason, or just for the company of an old grouch?"

Kirk grinned slightly. "I'm sorry about Atlanta, Bones. I know you were trying to help." He looked a little uncomfortable.

"You didn't come here just to apologize, did you?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, I came to tell you that I accepted Nogura's offer."

For a long moment McCoy shut his eyes, then he looked at Kirk. "You're a damn fool," he said quietly. "You'll regret this moment until the day you die. If you take my advice, you'll throw those stars right back in Nogura's face!"

For a moment they stood staring at each other. Suddenly they were no longer shipmates, comrades-in-arms. They were strangers at odds with one another, with nothing to bind them together.

Finally Kirk cleared his throat. "The ceremony's next week. I came to ask you to be there."

"You sure you want me?"

Kirk smiled bleakly. "I'd like somebody...."



Starfleet pulled out all the stops, and the ceremony marking Kirk's elevation to the Admiralty was impressive. The hero was reaping more honors, and a lot of people were there to wish him well.

The crew's shock that he was not returning to the *Enterprise* had subsided, and they were busy reassessing their own lives and futures. Most of them came to see him, and to say goodbye. The function following the ceremony was large and noisy, and went on for a long time.

Finally the people started thinning out. Kirk saw McCoy getting ready to leave. Excusing himself, he hurried after him.

"Bones!"

McCoy stopped and turned, his eyes taking in the beautiful fit of the Admiral's uniform, the extra rows of braid on the sleeve. He smiled. "Impressive, sir, very, very impressive."

Kirk grinned. "Not as likely to get torn as often as the old gold one."

"No, probably not."

Kirk hesitated. "I haven't had much time to see you, to talk to you. Have you given any more thought to my offer?"

"Of being your personal physician?" McCoy smiled slightly. He had given a great deal of thought to the offer, torn between wanting to stay and not being able to bear the thought of watching Kirk being slowly moulded into something he could never be - and the misery it would cause. He shook his head. "Sorry, Jim, but I can't. You said it yourself - you're not likely to get roughed up as much as you used to, and, although I complain a lot, I like to be busy."

Kirk's eyes showed the pain his face would never be allowed to show. "So what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Get out of the service, for one thing. I'm never going to make it as a military man. Maybe I'll go into research. We came across a lot of fascinating things during our tour out there. Might follow up on one of those."

Kirk was silent for a moment. "I'll miss you, Bones."

McCoy felt a lump start in his throat. "Yeah, well, you've got your work, and there's always Lori." He glanced over Kirk's shoulder. "She's waiting for you now."

They stood looking at each other, then McCoy reached out his hand. "Bye, Jim, I hope you find what you're searching for." Abruptly he turned away, and walked out of the room. And, like Spock, he never looked back.



LEGENDS AND MEN



So these are the legends of Starfleet -
Now Admiral and alien.
The cold brown eyes are filled
with the same pain
As the luminous hazel eyes that met mine
so briefly
And unflinchingly in the rec room
When he confirmed the rumors we had heard.
Pain -
Where there is pain there is feeling,
Yet Vulcans are not supposed to feel,
And the Admiral appears to be a caricature
of the type of man
Around which legends are built.
They seem wary of each other,
Unsure, yet searching for something...
Do they realize how much their eyes
reveal to others?
Do they care?
Or are they more concerned with finding
the men they were
Before becoming Admiral and alien?
Legends live apart from mortal men,
Held there by the distance of words
and deeds.
Then, suddenly, the alien allowed us
a glimpse
Of the men they are,
And showed why peace had replaced
the earlier pain
In both the brown and hazel eyes,
When he uttered a truth all of us
understand,
But so few ever find -

"IT KNOWS ONLY THAT IT NEEDS, COMMANDER

BUT, LIKE SO MANY OF US,

IT DOES NOT KNOW WHAT."



The spray was flying high as the sailboat rapidly cut its way through the choppy water, covering the three men who were sailing her. The strong sun blazed down from a cloudless sky and the wind blew without pause.

McCoy grimly hung onto the wheel that Kirk had abruptly left in his care. He blessed the fact that they were well out from shore and he didn't have to worry about ramming into anything.

But, as concerned as he was about trying to hold the flying boat on a straight course, he could not help but notice the easy way that Kirk and Spock worked together to lower and tighten the sails. McCoy knew that Spock's sailing experience was minimal, as was his own, yet that steel trap mind had recorded every sail position and he was experiencing no difficulty in following Kirk's orders.

To Kirk, standing on the slippery deck was as natural as standing on the bridge of a starship. McCoy knew that Kirk had purchased this sailboat shortly after becoming Chief of Operations for Starfleet and from what he had learned from other people who had worked with Kirk during that time, the boat had quickly become his life. He would spend every spare minute he had either working on her or out sailing the blue waters around San Francisco.

McCoy mentally shook his head over the suffering that all three of them had endured over the past few years - stupid, needless suffering. If only one of them had used his head at the end of that mission, if only one of them had held together long enough to talk some sense into the other two, it never would have happened. Talk about three men hitting a mid-life crisis all at the same time...

"Bones, for pete's sake, hold her straight! You'll have one of us over the side if you're not careful!"

Kirk's voice snapped McCoy out of his daydream and he quickly turned his full attention to guiding the boat. A few minutes later Kirk and Spock finished securing the sails and McCoy gratefully relinquished the wheel to Kirk.

"Sorry, Jim," he said with an apologetic smile.

"That's okay," said Kirk, "you're a doctor, not a navigator." They both laughed at the familiar line that McCoy used so often when he was annoyed.

McCoy got to his feet. "Seeing that I'm not as seasick as I thought I would be, I guess I'd better break out the food, that is if you have no objection, Captain, sir..."

"None from this department," said Kirk with a smile. "As a matter of fact, I'm starving!"

McCoy swung down into the small galley and started dishing out the food he had brought. He had managed to get a variety that would satisfy the three of them. As he was working, he saw Spock swing around the mast and make his way back to the stern where Kirk was sitting. For a moment he stopped what he was doing and stood looking at the two men as they sat talking.

They've changed, McCoy thought to himself. Jim's grown. The boy I once knew has lost all his illusions about life, about people. He's been through a personal hell and an even better man has emerged. He saw Kirk get up, the solid muscles in his bare chest and arms rippling under the dark tan.

"Hey, Bones, what are you doing down there? Growing lettuce for the salad?"

"Be right up!" McCoy turned back to the food but his thoughts were still on the others. *Spock's found an inner peace I always thought would elude him. How often I've nagged at him to let himself feel, to understand it's not wrong to depend on other people - to share his good points, and his bad. Yet he had to endure almost three years of sackcloth and ashes on that inferno he calls home before he finally discovered what had been in front of him all the time...*

"Doctor, are you in need of assistance?"

McCoy jumped, startled at the nearness of Spock's voice. He had not heard the Vulcan come down the ladder. "Blast it, Spock, you should know better than to creep up on people!"

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly at McCoy's unexpected outburst. "I assure you, Doctor, I was not creeping."

McCoy grinned, a little embarrassed at his own startled reaction. "Sorry. How about taking this up and I'll bring the rest of the stuff." Spock looked at him silently for a few moments, then nodded and took the plate filled with sandwiches, McCoy following behind with the rest of the food and holding a thermos of drinks under his arm.

The wind had dropped slightly while McCoy had been in the galley and the boat was quietly skimming across the water. Kirk sat with his arm dangling over the wheel, instinctively correcting the course as the wind threatened to tug the boat off its projected line.

Spock was inspecting the sandwiches when McCoy reached them. Kirk was already happily munching on one filled with peanut butter.

"There's peanut butter, Spock," said McCoy, "roast beef, and some cucumber and watercress..." He saw the Vulcan's eyes brighten at the sound of the last combination. "I'll bet you haven't had one of those for a long time."

"Indeed not," said Spock. "Neither of those ingredients are found on Vulcan."

"Especially not on Gol, I'd wager," said McCoy. Then he caught the warning look in Kirk's eye and fell silent. He still really had no idea of what attempting to undergo the Kolinahr had cost Spock, what sacrifice and discipline had been demanded of him as an acolyte, nor of the tremendous toll it had taken from him.

Spock had told Kirk a little about it. He had told him of his final, painful acceptance of the impossibility of his divided natures ever being able to accept and cope with the tremendous disciplines. Kirk had sat in silence listening to Spock's hesitant, pain-filled explanation of why he had left - of what he had been so desperately searching for - and why he had come back.

Spock had not allowed Kirk to respond, the dark eyes warning him that the pain of the last years was still too deep, that as yet he could not deal with pain other than his own.

As always, Kirk had accepted Spock's explanation even when he didn't really understand it. He had protected Spock from the others when the Vulcan had first returned to the *Enterprise*, even when he had been so obviously hurt after Spock had rejected his welcome with no hint of explanation. Kirk had not let any of the others question Spock, nor had he let McCoy's often devastating needling get out of hand. Even now, weeks later, Kirk still protected him. Spock needed time to heal, to cope with his determined decision to return to his former life. He needed time to relearn how to exist with the often illogical emotions of the humans he worked with - to learn again to be the alien among humans - and to learn to deal with the emotions he had finally openly admitted that he felt for the one man so important in his universe.

McCoy poured iced tea for all of them, then leaned back against the side of the boat enjoying the light spray that fell from the rising waves. He chuckled quietly as he watched Kirk pressing a peanut butter sandwich on the somewhat reluctant Vulcan, knowing there was no way that Spock was going to be able to refuse.

"Come on, Spock, you've eaten peanut butter before!"

Spock looked longingly at the last cucumber and watercress sandwich, then took the sandwich that Kirk was holding out. Kirk grinned as he turned back to the wheel and slowly swung the boat around so it was facing the far distant city. The sails again filled with wind and the boat dug deeply into the choppy water.

"All I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by..." McCoy spoke so quietly as to almost go unheard, his eyes on his captain and his friend. Kirk's eyes met his and, for a moment, memories surfaced of the awful experience with the MS computer, but that experience had forged an already firm friendship even deeper.

"She's not as tall as that ship, Bones," Kirk said quietly. Spock glanced up at him, not sure what the two of them were talking about. Seeing that Kirk's thoughts were obviously far away, he silently substituted the untouched peanut butter sandwich for the last cucumber and watercress and settled back to enjoy it.

"No," agreed McCoy, "but you have one that is..."

A smile crossed Kirk's face at the mention of the *Enterprise*, the lady he had once so foolishly given up, the home to which he had finally returned.

"...And," continued McCoy, "this is closer to what the poet was writing about - the sea, the sky, the wind - things that are missing in space."

Kirk glanced around. "I guess some things are destined never to change."

McCoy nodded. "And some things should never change."

Spock had finished his sandwich and looked up at McCoy's last statement. "That is illogical, Doctor. Life brings change. Nothing remains stationary, not even something that appears as unchanging as the sea. There are constant changes, perhaps not apparent to the naked eye but there nonetheless."

McCoy's blue eyes darkened for a moment, annoyed that Spock's infernal logic had once again succeeded in destroying a precious moment. "I was speaking figuratively,, Spock," he said, his annoyance sounding strong in his

voice.

Spock looked surprised at McCoy's angry response but before he had a chance to answer, Kirk's quiet voice broke in. "I hate to be the spoil sport, but I have to be at an operations meeting in a couple of hours. We'd better get ourselves ready to head home."

"I don't want the wheel!" said McCoy, a sudden fear running through him that Kirk would expect him to guide the boat while he and Spock worked the sails.

"Don't worry, Bones," said Kirk with a laugh, "I paid too much for her to let you smash her on the rocks. Spock can get the sails down while you hold them out of the way. We'll roll them once we're docked." The three of them fell to their work and yet another impending argument between Spock and McCoy was averted.



Kirk was almost ready. He ran a brush through his hair as he tried to remember when on earth he had left his wrist communicator. He remembered seeing it in an unusual place but for the life of him he couldn't remember where that was. For a moment he stood silent, his mind going over his various routes of the past few days and the likely places his communicator might be.

A slight noise disturbed him and he looked up to see Spock standing in the doorway. His eyes were locked on Kirk's figure and Kirk had a sudden uncomfortable feeling that he had forgotten to put on an important piece of clothing. He resisted the urge to look down, returning the Vulcan's look steadily, wondering what was holding his attention so completely.

Finally Spock walked forward. "Admiral..." The voice was low and congratulatory. he had never before seen Kirk in the dress of an Admiral of Starfleet Command.

Kirk grinned, suddenly realizing what Spock had been looking at. "They don't boot people downstairs, Commander, not even insubordinate officers of flag rank."

A slight smile tugged at the corners of Spock's mouth. "Your promotion was a logical step, Jim. That uniform does, however, add to the symbolic honor."

"You mean I look dashing," said Kirk with a laugh, knowing full well that the uniform fit his trim, muscular figure to perfection, accenting his broad shoulders and narrow hips in a way many females had found irresistible, and they had provided one small way by which he had somehow managed to partially keep his sanity during those long, lonely months after Lori had left.

Spock nodded, an open smile fighting to break the austere face.

"However," continued Kirk, "this dashing hero is going to get his butt kicked if he can't find his communicator and is late for that operations meeting."

"Your communicator is in the pantry next to the popcorn," said Spock without a moment's hesitation.

Kirk looked at him for a moment. "Is there anything you don't know, Spock?"

"There is a great deal that I do not know. However, I am usually observant of my surroundings..."

"Yeah, sure," interrupted Kirk with a grin. "Well, I have to go out to dinner with Admiral Nogura and some of his cohorts after this meeting so I don't suggest waiting up for me." He moved to the door. "Beside the popcorn?" Spock nodded. "Third shelf up on the left hand side."



The music was playing quietly as Spock walked into the book-lined study. They were staying in the large house that Kirk had purchased in the hills high above San Francisco. As a member of the Admiralty and as Chief of Operations for Starfleet, he had had to do quite a bit of entertaining and so had acquired the large stone house for that purpose. It had also turned into a refuge of sorts where he could get away, where he could be among his beloved books and the few possessions that would remind him of the life he had led, the life to which he had so desperately wished to return.

The study was Kirk's haven. It was here that he had shyly shown Spock and McCoy what it was that he held important in his life. It was a comfortable place with warm, burnished wood bookcases lining the room, a large mantled fireplace dominating one wall, surrounded by deep, comfortable, leather-covered furniture. An antique oak desk made from the wood of one of the 'original' Enterprises stood on the opposite side of the room from the fireplace, a beautifully detailed miniature clipper ship standing proudly on it, her tiny sails filled with an invisible wind, sailing on a invisible ocean.

McCoy was sitting in one of the deep armchairs watching something on the wall viewscreen. Spock had been there for a number of minutes before McCoy noticed him.

"Does it make any sense to you, Spock?" he asked cheerfully.

An eyebrow lifted as Spock thought of an answer. "It does not strike me as something that would interest the captain enough to have purchased it," he admitted as he looked at the screen, at the image of a woman who appeared

to be wailing into an old fashioned microphone.

"My thought exactly," agreed McCoy, "so I asked him about it. He said that Admiral Ciani was interested in old films so they had joined a society that showed old movies - some actually dating back to the twentieth century. He said this one really caught him, but I can't see that it has any redeeming qualities whatsoever." He glanced at the chronometer. "Oops, it's getting late. I've got a divisions banquet at the Surgeon General's tonight and if I know Ganaud, I'm not going to be in any shape to try to steer an aircar afterwards. I'll probably stay in town tonight. Hope you don't mind being by yourself."

"Not at all, Doctor. I am sure you will enjoy being with your colleagues."

"Well, I'm not so sure," said McCoy with a grin, "but there's no way to avoid finding out. See you tomorrow." With that, he bustled out the door, leaving Spock alone, the videotape still running.

Spock paid no attention to it. His eyes ran slowly over the room, savouring all those things that Kirk loved, all those things that belonged to the man he had finally had the courage to reach out to and admit need.

He got up and walked across to the bookshelves, his eyes running over the many varied titles, books that covered a wide range of subjects, books that could only just begin to satisfy the inquiring mind of their owner.

And he accuses me of insatiable curiosity, though Spock told himself as he moved closer to the fireplace, and to the fire that was crackling on the hearth. *Gold flames...gold like his eyes...*

Slowly the words from a song sung by the woman on the viewscreen penetrated Spock's mind as he stood looking at the fire. At first he did not pay much attention to them - he was watching the flames, his thoughts far away. Finally the words forced him to listen, and suddenly he understood why Kirk had purchased such a ridiculous videotape. This last song was saying it all. It covered a lot of emotion - a lot of hurt. And it asked questions that Spock knew Kirk would never ask anyone but himself.



The fire was eventually only glowing embers in the dark room. Spock had sat for a long time, his stomach a hard lump in the middle of his body. He knew he had hurt Kirk by leaving. He had tried to explain why he had done it and even though he knew Kirk didn't really understand why he had gone, he had accepted Spock's explanation and had welcomed him back.

Now a simple song sung from the depths of someone's soul more than three centuries ago showed him all of Kirk's pain.

"The Rose." A simple title - simple words. A rose - a fragile flower, the thorns a small protection from life, yet like everything else it could be so easily wounded, so easily killed.

These were words that Spock knew Kirk had listened to, words that Spock knew with certainty that Kirk had cried over, just as he had listened with hot tears stinging the back of his eyes. The song was sung with emotion, with a desperate loneliness that Spock had rarely heard, but easily understood.

Sighing quietly, he got up and put more logs on the fire, then ran the tape back and sat down again to let the words flow over him, letting the voice reach to his soul.

*Some say love, it is a river
That drowns the tender reed.
Some say love, it is a razor
That leaves the soul to bleed.
Some say love, it is a hunger,
An endless, aching need.
I say love, it is a flower,
And you its only seed.
It's the heart afraid of breaking,
That never learns to dance.
It's the dream afraid of waking,
That never takes the chance.
It's the one who won't be taken,
Who cannot seem to give.
And the soul afraid of dying,
That never learns to live.
When the night has been too lonely,
And the road has been too long,
And you think that love is only*

*For the lucky and the strong,
Just remember in the winter,
Far beneath the bitter snows,
Lies the seed that with the sun's love
In the spring becomes the rose.*

Again the room fell silent. Slowly Spock stood and rewound the tape, then took it from the machine. His mind was filled with images of Kirk - of Kirk sitting on the bridge when he had first walked out of the turbolift - the look of astonishment turning to welcome and then puzzled hurt. Then the same later in the Officer's Lounge - the welcome, the puzzlement, hurt, then anger - but never condemnation. Kirk with great trust in his own instincts was willing to wait until Spock opened to him.

"How I've hurt you," said Spock softly. "There is no way I can ever make it up." He had not really ever let himself realize how much he must have hurt Kirk by abruptly walking out of his life. Not until this moment - not until he had let those simple words tell him of the loneliness of another - a lonely cry in the darkness, a question which had no answer because the only one who could answer was no longer at his side.

The words were about the Vulcan, not about the human who was so alone. Kirk had never been afraid of love, had never been afraid to express love, yet he had never once pushed, never once pried as McCoy had so often pried. How could he have been so blind? How could he have caused so much pain to the one person he had always loved...?

Then Spock shook his head. Recrimination would get him nowhere. The damage had been done but it was not irreparable. He had come to his senses enough to reach out his hand and it had been accepted. They were together again. Kirk had his ship and his crew and they were together. Nothing else mattered.



Kirk leaned back in his chair and stretched. He wondered if there had ever been an operations meeting that didn't turn out to be an absolute bore. This one was finally breaking up after several hours of senseless bickering about senseless rules.

Kirk found himself wondering how he had managed to put up with this garbage for the number of years that he had. I must have really hit a low point, he thought to himself, if I honestly thought that I might have made a difference... A hand hitting his shoulder brought him out of his daydream.

"Ready, Jim?" Kirk glanced up to see Admiral Nogura standing beside him. Nodding, Kirk rose to his feet. His stomach was letting him know that it was more than ready for dinner.

The dinner was ordered and drinks were served all round before Nogura spoke again. "You've definitely decided about the Enterprise, haven't you, Jim?" Kirk looked at him in surprise. He thought they had hashed this out weeks ago. He nodded but didn't say anything.

Nogura frowned. Kirk had not risen to the bait as Nogura had hoped he would. He looked around the table and noted that no one met his gaze - no one except Kirk. And that was the reason he didn't want to lose him. Kirk was the only man of flag rank who dared to stand up to Commanding Admiral Nogura, and that meant a great deal to the Admiral.

"Jim..." he started.

"No!" Kirk's voice was very low but his eyes were like granite.

"Admiral Kirk, I am your commanding officer..."

"Not any longer, sir. I am now under the jurisdiction of Operations, not the Admiralty..."

"You are still an Admiral, sir..."

"Here, yes, but on the Enterprise I am a captain and I value that position far more than I ever have these stars." He got up. He suddenly realized why Nogura had brought him here along with the other operational heads. The old man had not yet given up his hope that somehow he would get Kirk to change his mind and not take the Enterprise for a second mission. He suddenly knew he had to get out, had to leave before Nogura had a chance to start these other lackeys harping on the same subject. "If you will excuse me, sir," he said quietly, "I have another appointment." He nodded formally to Nogura and left before the Admiral had a chance to stop him.

By the time he left Fleet Headquarters he was boiling mad. Briefly he thought about heading straight home but decided that he would only take his anger out on Spock and McCoy and that would hardly be fair. He decided to take a long walk and let himself cool down before he had to face anyone.

The streets fell away under his feet. He paid no attention to where he was going, nor did he notice how long he had been walking. With his hands buried deep in his pockets, his eyes fixed on the pavement in front of him, he let his anger carry him far away from the areas he was familiar with and deep into the heart of the city.

Gradually he became aware of other footsteps. He looked up to see that he was slowly being surrounded by a group of people - human and alien. He slowed his pace a little and they closed their circle. He drew to a halt,

noting that some of them were pulling what looked vaguely like Klingon disruptors.

"What do you want?" he asked quietly.

One of the men started to answer, only to be stopped by what appeared to be the leader of the group. "Silence, Leim," he said sharply. He looked at Kirk. "What is Starfleet doing in Sadag?"

"Where?" echoed Kirk. "I don't understand." He slowly brought his hands forward reaching for his communicator as unobtrusively as he could. Suddenly everything went black.



Spock jerked awake, wondering what it was that woke him. The room was dark and the house was silent. He lay still for a few minutes but there was nothing in the peaceful silence to disturb him. Finally he rolled over and went back to sleep.



"Who are you?" The voice came again and again, asking the same questions. "Why are you here?"

Kirk's head was pounding. He was tied to an iron bed, his wrists wired to the bars at the head of the bed, his ankles wired to the bottom. His hands and feet were long since numb but the pain in his wrists and ankles let him know the wire was digging deep.

A hand slapped across his face. "Answer me, human! I know you are conscious!"

Kirk finally opened his eyes and looked at his tormentor. Cold alien blue eyes looked back, the eyes of a murderer, the eyes of a man Kirk realized he would have to humor if there were any hope of getting out of this situation alive.

"James Kirk."

For a moment the man stared at him. "Admiral - Starfleet Command. What position do you hold?"

"Captain, Starship rank.."

"Admirals do not command starships!"

"I do. The U.S.S. Enterprise..." His voice broke off as the hard hand hit him again.

"You lie! The Enterprise belongs to the one named Decker. You were sent here, but why were you sent in uniform? Why did Starfleet want us to know they have discovered us? Why did they not come in force?" He stood looking down at Kirk, at the blood that was running from the corner of his mouth and the bruises that were forming from the constant blows. "Trebe is coming," he continued thoughtfully. "We will wait for him."

To Kirk's horror, the man pulled a dirty looking needle and syringe from his pocket - an old, barbaric looking device. The man laughed as he saw Kirk's expression. "So, human, this worries you, does it? I take it you have never mainlined. I thought all of your rank would have known the pleasures of herrash."

Kirk shuddered. Herrash was a powerful narcotic and, if used often enough to become addicted, it could destroy brain function in a human. He had known many people whose careers had been ended by this drug. He knew that it was a rare case that recovered after a long, tough fight, and almost always with some lasting damage. If that happened to him there would be no possibility of command - no Enterprise - not if this man carried out his threat.

"Please...no..." Kirk's voice was cracked and dry. He had not realized he would find it so easy to plead, but suddenly that didn't matter. He couldn't let all those painfilled years come back to hold him in their grip. Not now, not when life was once more held out before him, not when he was so close to regaining all he had lost.

"Just a little," laughed the man, "just enough so that your body will cry for more. Just enough so you will realize that you can't fight us. We can bring you peace - relief from your agony..."

The wire tore Kirk's wrists open as he struggled. He could feel the warm blood running down his arms as a strap was fixed around his upper arm. The man pulled the sleeve up until he found the big vein on the inside of Kirk's elbow. There was nothing gentle about the way he injected the drug. The grimy needle tore through Kirk's arm as he continued struggling. Some of the drug went into the vein, the rest into the muscle around the vein. Kirk could feel the instant pain and reaction to a drug that burned and destroyed muscle tissue on contact. It was meant to be injected intravenously if it was used at all. His arm instantly began to swell.

"Now that was stupid, wasn't it, Admiral?" said the man nastily as he pulled the syringe from Kirk's arm. Kirk was sickened to see the man wipe the needle on his own dirty shirt, then inject himself with the same drug. But the effect on him would be much different than with Kirk. The herrash which could so easily destroy a human scarcely affected an alien. It would give a pleasant high then would wear off, leaving no ill effects.

The man called out and some others came into the room. "He's been injected and it's time for us to leave. He must not be found by others." He motioned to them and they quickly untied Kirk from the bed, then forced him into a small, filthy closet. There they securely tied him with more wire, his hands behind his back, then he was pushed to his knees and his wrists were wired to his ankles. Then they stuffed a gag in his mouth and left him locked in the darkness.

As the long hours dragged past, Kirk could feel the effects of the drug sweep through his system. His stomach churned as the foreign substance gripped him. He felt sick and weak, which he knew was a first reaction to the herrash. He slumped sideways against the wall. He could handle this with no great difficulty provided they didn't give him much more. The alien had said he was injecting just enough to keep him from fighting. Maybe they felt that if they kept him feeling sick that it would be sufficient. He hoped so anyway. Maybe he could brazen this out - appear to be more affected than he was. Maybe then they wouldn't reinject him.

He made several useless attempts to get more comfortable but however he shifted his position, the wire dug deeply into his skin. Then, suddenly, he was doubled over by violent cramps. The gag prevented him from crying out, but his upper body jackknifed forward, fresh blood running down his hands as the wire cord dug even deeper into his wrists. The pain left almost as quickly as it had come, and he slowly pushed himself back up the wall, sweat starting to run down his face. He desperately wanted to be sick but forced himself to keep control. With the gag so tightly binding his mouth, throwing up was not a good idea.

Hang in there, Kirk, he thought grimly. You've been through worse than this. So, in his dark prison, locked away from the world with no one to miss him or wonder where he was, Kirk began a silent, solitary fight for survival.



Spock paced restlessly around the hours, wondering where the others were. McCoy had said that he would probably stay in the city overnight but Kirk had said only that he would be back late - and he had not come back at all. Spock did not really understand the restlessness that held him - he felt only that something was not right. Still, he was reluctant to contact anyone. A Vulcan did not function by emotion, and he had no logical basis for his uneasiness. He decided he would wait a while longer before he acted.



The bright light from the main room momentarily blinded Kirk as the door opened. He quickly turned his head away, the movement causing sharp jabs of pain to shoot through his head. However, the headache was almost all that remained of the scary symptoms that spelled the presence of herrash. The cramps had subsided and, although he still felt slightly queasy, he knew he was no longer in danger of throwing up.

He lay passive as the wire bonds and gag were removed and he was pulled from the closet. Momentarily he tried to move on his own and instantly confirmed what he had suspected - his feet were too numb to feel. He would have to wait for a while before he tried anything. At the moment he wouldn't be capable of going anywhere on his own.

They pushed him into a chair, then all left except the one alien who had given him the drug earlier. Kirk glanced at him, then looked away, more because the light hurt his eyes than being unable to face his captor.

The alien mistook the movement for fear. "Well, now," he said with a chuckle, "I would have thought a pretty uniform like that would give a little more courage to the man who wore it." He got up and poured a glass of water, then turned back to Kirk. There was no mistaking the look in the hazel eyes - the human wanted it. "I find I get thirsty after the herrash has worn off. Do you find the same?"

For a moment Kirk looked at him, then nodded silently. He would play this game if it could buy him some time. The pain in his hands and feet was telling him that his circulation was starting to return.

The alien smiled. "Do you want this?" he asked, holding up the water.

Again Kirk nodded.

The alien got up. "What do the manners of your society require you to say?"

Kirk swallowed hard. How much humiliation was he expected to undergo? His voice cracked as he spoke, his mouth feeling as though it was full of cotton. "Pl...please."

The alien laughed. "Very good, Admiral." He walked forward and held out the glass. Painfully, Kirk reached forward. Just as his hand touched the glass, the alien tipped it and the water poured out onto the floor.

"Oh, too bad," said the alien, savouring the horrified look on Kirk's face. "Well, maybe we'll try again later. Water doesn't come cheaply, you know."

As he turned back to the sink, Kirk took his chance and broke for the door. His action caught the alien off guard and he almost made it. Almost, but not quite. He was slowed by the remaining numbness in his feet and was tackled just as he reached the door. His head hit the wood with a tremendous crack as he fell forward, and he lay stunned on the floor.

"Now that wasn't a nice thing to do, Admiral," said the alien as he rolled Kirk over with his foot. Kirk lay on his back, his head threatening to split open. He had miscalculated and he knew he was going to pay for it. He struggled feebly as he was pulled across the room, but his vision kept swimming and his hands and feet were still numb from being tied for so long.

To his relief he wasn't put back in the closet. He was dragged to a corner where he was pulled to a sitting

position and his hands were tied behind him, then secured tightly to a building support that was visible behind one of the many holes in the room's walls.

Kirk sagged back waiting for his head to stop spinning. He scarcely noticed that his shoes and socks were being removed. Suddenly he froze. His pant leg was being pushed up and the sharp sting of the needle going into his ankle, and the painful burn start as more of the drug went into his muscle.

The alien got up and turned to face him. "That was double the last dose, Admiral. You should have been nice to me. I wouldn't have given you another shot if you'd been nice to me."

"Go to hell!" said Kirk savagely, trying to let his hate and anger conquer the cold fear that had clamped his stomach into a hard ball. But the alien only laughed as he moved away. He was looking forward to the next hours. A human's reaction to herrash had always fascinated him and he rarely had a chance to watch one newly exposed. Usually he only saw those humans at the clinic whose dependence was already firmly established - and who were dying. This one was strong and as yet full of fight. He settled himself onto the bed where Kirk had been tied, and sat back to watch.



Kirk still wasn't back when McCoy finally called in late afternoon. By then Spock had stopped caring about Vulcan emotion and told McCoy of his fears. As usual, McCoy did not doubt what Spock said. When it came to Kirk and the subject of his safety, Spock never exaggerated and, to McCoy's knowledge, he had never been wrong.

He told Spock that he would start a quiet search to see if anyone had seen Kirk and that he would meet the Vulcan at Fleet Headquarters. He hoped there was a simple explanation for Kirk's disappearance but was experiencing a sinking feeling that there wouldn't be.

By the time Spock arrived, McCoy had traced Kirk's steps until he had left the Officer's Club the previous evening. After that time no one had seen him or heard from him. Spock and McCoy contacted everyone they could think of, even people they knew Kirk probably hadn't seen in years - and drew a complete blank.

They sat in silence for some minutes, then Spock looked at McCoy. "We should contact Security, Doctor. There is no way the two of us can search an entire city."

"Or possibly a country or a world," said McCoy, his fear and frustration sounding in his voice. "Okay, Spock, I'll come with you, then I've got to see Admiral Nogura."



Kirk fought the drug as long as he could, desperately trying not to let himself become an object of amusement for the alien who was watching him from across the room. He put up a valiant struggle but the drug was too powerful and he eventually gave in to the terrible cramps and nausea that were wracking his body.

Finally Kirk sagged limply forward, exhausted and depleted from the raging of the chemical through his system. He heard the alien get off the bed and move to his side. Weakly he lifted his head. He watched as they syringe moved toward his other leg. He found he didn't have the strength to move. He watched the needle puncture the flesh and the clear fluid leave the syringe, then leaned his head back against the wall.

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

The alien looked at him and, for a brief moment, Kirk almost thought he saw a look of sympathy. "You are suffering," he said simply.

"And this is supposed to help?" asked Kirk in angry astonishment.

The alien nodded. "This one will. You have been sick because your body was not used to the drug. This time you will feel the joys of herrash, not just the horrors."

Kirk felt cold dread. Joys could mean only one thing, that his system would accept and accommodate the drug - the first step to addiction. He looked down at the small dribble of blood on his ankle - an innocent wound that could spell his destruction. He took a deep breath and braced himself. It surely was only a matter of time now before someone would come looking for him. By now either Spock or McCoy would have contacted Starfleet and listed him as missing. San Francisco wasn't all that large. Someone would find him. He just had to hang on until then.



Security raised a general alarm and discreet inquiries were begun by security personnel. Spock was making an increasingly difficult attempt to hold onto his temper as he tried to convince an equally stubborn Lt. Commander that he and McCoy had already done all those things that the man had ordered the details to do, and it would be more beneficial to expand the inquiry rather than to go over ground already covered.

Admiral Nogura met them at Security Headquarters. "Commanders," he said shortly, "come with me please." Spock and McCoy glanced at each other, then followed the stiff, retreating back of the Commanding Admiral.

No word was spoken until the door of Nogura's private office closed, then he turned to the two officers. "All right, what is going on?"

Spock stepped forward as McCoy opened his mouth to speak and smoothly cut him off. He knew McCoy was upset and worried about Kirk, and apt to say something he would regret later.

"Captain Kirk left yesterday afternoon to go to an operations meeting, sir, then he was planning to go to dinner with you. He said he would be late returning." Spock's dark eyes held Nogura's unflinchingly. "He never returned."

For a long moment Nogura looked at him, then glanced at the report in his hand. "Yet you waited until this afternoon to report it. Why?"

"Kirk is not a child, sir," said Spock, his voice sounding respectful even though his words did not. "He is not used to having a curfew put on his activities."

Nogura's eyes shot to Spock's face but met only a challenging silence.

Atta boy, Spock! thought McCoy gleefully. Don't let him bully you - wake you back down!

Nogura cleared his throat, then thought better than to take up Spock's quiet challenge. "All right, your comments are noted. Yet you feel this action is unusual for Kirk..."

"The captain normally contacts one of us if his plans change," said Spock quietly.

Nogura nodded. "Yes, the 'Admiral' always did the same here..." His eyes locked with Spock's but again the Vulcan refused to back down.

"Admiral," broke in McCoy, "I am not familiar with the proper procedure in cases like this..."

"Cases like this?" echoed Nogura, quiet anger sounding in his voice. "Cases like what, Doctor? I don't think you appreciate the gravity of the situation. It is not just a man who is missing, it is the Chief of Operations for Starfleet Command..."

"But he resigned," said McCoy stubbornly.

"Doctor," said Spock quietly, "you are missing the point. The Admiral means that Jim could be a weapon in himself..."

"What? Spock, you're making less sense than he is..."

"If you will let me finish, Commander," said Nogura impatiently. "Kirk is one of the most dangerously informed people in Starfleet, Doctor. He knows every movement of every ship and practically every officer in the Fleet - he ordered most of them. If he has fallen into the wrong hands and if they should managed to obtain that information..."

"Oh boy," said McCoy, slightly stunned at the implications. He looked at Nogura. "Admiral, since I am not assigned to Headquarters, I need your permission to use the medical monitoring lab."

Spock glanced at McCoy, wondering what the human was up to. "For what purpose, Doctor?" said Nogura, making a visible effort to control his temper. He was not used to people making a stand against him as Spock was doing. The Vulcan's dark eyes were condemning him for something, although Nogura did not know for what.

McCoy looked at Spock for support and got it, even though the Vulcan had no idea what he was going to suggest. Their exchange was not lost on Nogura.

"At the moment, sir, we have no idea if Kirk is alive, or where he is. Part of that might be answered if the medical section tried to home in on his medical monitor. I can't order that done without your permission..."

"Of course!" broke in Nogura, "I was stupid not to think of it. Come on!" Nogura walked quickly from his office with Spock and McCoy right behind him.



A foot none too gently pushed at Kirk's ribs. Kirk groaned and tried to move away, but his arms held him firmly secured. A tall, rather good looking man turned to the alien standing at his side.

"What did you give him, Tandy?"

"Just a touch of herrash, Trebe, enough to keep him docile."

Trebe looked back down at Kirk's slumped figure. He had obviously been given more than a touch, and had been given herrash more than once. The blood on the man's wrists and ankles bore mute testimony to the useless struggle he had put up and the struggle he had lost.

"Untie him, get him onto his feet," said Trebe as he turned away. He did not look back until all sounds of movement had died away and he turned to see James T. Kirk, Chief of Operations for Starfleet Command standing in front of him. He looked at Kirk in stunned silence for a moment, looked at the damning uniform of the man's rank, then turned to Tandy. "Of all the people in this city, indeed on this entire world, you had to pick on this one? Tandy, it's bad enough to kidnap a Starfleet officer in the first place, much less one of flag rank, but do you have any idea who this man is?"

"Said his name was James Kirk," mumbled Tandy defensively, a little angry and confused that Trebe wasn't overjoyed by what he had done.

"Exactly, James Kirk. And if he isn't the most important man in Starfleet he must be pretty damn close. This city will get turned upside down when they discover he's missing!"

"Don't see what's so special about him. We've taken others before..."

"Those were men on merchant lines who had information concerning cargo that we needed. Those men lived nomad lives - no one would ever question their disappearance. This man is the Chief of Operations for the entire Fleet! There's a big difference there, Tandy, a very big difference which you..." Trebe broke off and stood looking at Tandy. The alien had obviously been dabbling in herrash again himself and was too strung out to follow any line of reasoning at the moment. Trebe would have to wait for the drug to lessen its hold before he tried to explain further.

He turned back to Kirk who was now being held upright in the secure grip of a man on either side of him. The hazel eyes were dark and defiant, even though the drug still held him and the ravages of the beginning of its conquest were more than evident.

"Well, Admiral," said Trebe, "it is indeed an honor to meet you. Of course all such as we know of James Kirk and his accomplishments."

"What do you want of me? Who are you?" Kirk's quiet voice was amazingly steady considering the number of injections of herrash he had been given. Yet, to Trebe's surprise, Kirk appeared to have held some measure of control. It was obvious that he was susceptible to the drug, but he clearly had not yet been totally dominated by it.

"To be truthful, Admiral," replied Trebe just as quietly, "I really don't know what we're going to do with you. You're too dangerous to keep and too dangerous to kill. Yet there must be a reason why you came to Sadag..."

"What is Sadag?" asked Kirk sharply, but with an uneasy feeling that he already knew although he couldn't remember.

"Come now, Kirk," said Trebe, "you know the answer to that. Why else would you be here?" Kirk opened his mouth to reply but the man had already turned away. "Tandy, I think we'd better give him some more herrash - keep him quiet for a while longer until we can come up with a plan."

"No!" Kirk knew he couldn't fight another shot and he was terrified of what would happen. He twisted in the grip of his captor's hands and the sleeve of his uniform tore. Large, ulcerated sores covered the inside of his elbow. Trebe looked at Tandy.

"He struggled. The needle slipped..."

"Needle?"

Tandy nodded. "Only thing I had handy."

"Yours, I suppose."

"What's wrong with that?"

Trebe shook his head. "Nothing now, I guess. I doubt if he'll live long enough to give back anyway, even if we could. Inject him, then put him in the closet and make sure he's securely tied. I don't want anyone finding him accidentally. I'm going to see what I can find out. I'll be back later."



The technicians looked up in surprise when Nogura, followed by Spock and McCoy came pounding into the scanning lab, closely pursued by the Surgeon General and Greg O'Connor, head of the medical complex at Starfleet Headquarters.

"Rogers," puffed O'Connor, "pull all recent history of Admiral James Kirk and set up an immediate medical scan for same."

"Yes, sir." The young technician might have been startled at their arrival but he was all business once he had been given orders, a happening that impressed Nogura.

Minutes ticked by like hours as Rogers and his team set up the necessary equipment. Silence screamed out as the computers started collecting the required data.

"Got him, sir!" Rogers' voice broke into the stillness as his eyes remained glued to the computer readouts. O'Connor activated an auxiliary computer that would give out the same information, but flashed on a large view-screen, not the private scanner that Rogers was using.

Kirk was alive, but it was obvious that he was far from all right. The monitoring system showed he was in a highly agitated state, both his body and mind being highly stimulated by something. Rogers and his technicians worked feverishly on the incoming data, and they all paled when the results finally correlated.

"Herrash," said McCoy in a choked whisper. "My god, he's taken herrash!"

For a moment Spock stood in frozen silence, then he turned to McCoy. "He had not taken it, Doctor. Someone else has given it to him."

Nogura looked at them both and started to say something when Rogers' voice interrupted him. "We've lost the

signal!"

Instantly O'Connor was at his side. "How? What happened?"

"Is he dead?" came Nogura's voice.

Rogers shook his head. "I don't think so, sir. The symptoms he was exhibiting were not violent enough to have caused death, at least not yet. That was not withdrawal he was experiencing, that was a full high - herrash at its maximum dose in a body that was accommodating the chemical..."

"Meaning that he's been missing long enough now for someone to be able to have given him six or eight shots, Admiral," broke in McCoy angrily. "Full strength, any human would be starting to become addicted by now!"

Rogers looked from one to the other, then his eyes fell on Spock, mutely appealing for help.

"You do not feel he is dead," said Spock quietly.

"No, sir," said Rogers gratefully. "More likely someone has taken his tunic off and the belt scanner has been destroyed."

"Which means that whoever has him is at least somewhat familiar with Starfleet," said Spock thoughtfully.

"But who?" asked O'Connor, "and what reason would they have to risk bringing the power of Starfleet down on them?"

Only silence answered him. No one had an answer to the senseless riddle.



Kirk was experiencing his first high from the herrash as Trebe came bursting into the room and jerked open the closet door. Kirk was lying on his side talking quietly to himself and giggling at his own words.

"Tandy!" yelled Trebe. "Get him untied - fast!" He was already dragging Kirk out of the small closet when Tandy reached him and ripped the wire forcefully from Kirk's wrists and ankles.

"Ouch!" Kirk made an attempt to focus his eyes on Tandy. "That wasn't nice...hurt little handies." He giggled again.

"Quick, strip off his clothes!"

"What?" Tandy stared at Trebe.

"That belt - it's a scanner. I was a blasted fool not to realize it sooner. If Starfleet locks onto that, we would be in bigger trouble than we are already. Quick, man, don't just stand there gaping!"

Within seconds they had stripped Kirk completely and Tandy did a thorough body search while Trebe destroyed the scanner.

"Rub a dub dub," murmured Kirk happily as Tandy's hands searched for anything unusual. "Wanna rubber duckie," he said as he was pulled to his feet. He looked at Trebe. "Bath time," he announced solemnly. "Can't go to bed like this."

"How much of that stuff have you given him now, Tandy?" asked Trebe as he looked at the numerous ulcerated sores on Kirk's arms and legs.

"Don't know. He keeps struggling..."

Trebe nodded. "I'd cut it back a bit. He's going to blow apart soon if you shoot him up much more."

"But the withdrawal...?"

"Is more preferable. We may have to destroy him, Tandy. It could well be his life versus ours. Bind him and gag him again, then lock him in the closet. If he starts yelling, I don't want anyone to hear him."



Spock and McCoy were standing at attention in Nogura's office. The admiral had not asked them to sit and had been staring at the two of them for the past several minutes without speaking.

Finally he turned away and got some brandy out, pouring a glass for himself. "The technicians have been told not to talk..." He downed the brandy, then turned back to the two officers, his eyes boring into Spock. "You said earlier, Commander, that you felt someone else had given herrash to Admiral Kirk. Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, sir," said Spock with quiet conviction.

"Doctor," said Nogura, looking at McCoy, "isn't it possible that Kirk has done this to himself? He's been very depressed in recent months...not at all the man we knew. Just last night he more or less told me to shove it..."

McCoy's face flushed as Nogura spoke. "The pot should never call the kettle black, Admiral. Anything Jim went through was a direct cause of your actions..."

"That is not what I asked, Doctor," said Nogura sharply, but unconsciously he appreciated McCoy's willingness to stand up to him, just as Kirk was ready to go against his wishes, his orders. It was no wonder the *Enterprise* had been the ship she had been with these men. He brought his mind back to the present. "These screenings show Kirk is taking or has taken herrash. I am asking you if you think Kirk is capable of such a self-destructive and drastic action?"

For a moment McCoy thought of the hesitant, unsure man he had first seen aboard the new *Enterprise*. Kirk's state of mind and obvious depression then might have allowed him to toy with the idea of the relief that herrash might have brought him. But the man who had faced V'ger never would have. That James Kirk would never destroy himself. McCoy looked at Nogura. "No, sir, I don't believe he would be."

"You hesitated, Doctor," said Nogura quietly. "Your eyes told me that you did indeed believe that Kirk might be capable of such an act." McCoy was fully aware of the daggers aimed at him from Spock.

Damn it, Spock he thought, I can't be poker faced all the time like you are. And Nogura's right, I did hesitate.

"Gentlemen," said Nogura quietly, "I don't know if you really appreciate the gravity of the situation. Kirk is still officially Head of Operations. That means he has top security throughout Starfleet. He possibly knows more about this organization than any other man alive, excluding myself. Now he is missing and from what little we have been able to ascertain, quite likely is no longer rational. Whether or not he took the drug himself is really no longer the issue. He knows too much. If he falls into the wrong hands we can kiss this organization goodbye..."

"Kirk would never break!" broke in McCoy angrily.

"He'll do anything someone asks if they withdraw that drug, Doctor," said Nogura in an icy voice. "We both know that. He's human and he has his breaking point. We all do. I will not have him jeopardize the Fleet..."

"Meaning what, Admiral?" Spock's voice was the coldest sound Nogura had ever heard.

"Meaning Starfleet comes first, Commander. We have to find him."

"I will..."

"No, you won't!" Nogura's voice held a quiet menace. "You and Dr. McCoy are confined to base."

"Admiral," continued Spock, the coldness now in his eyes as well as in his voice, "we must return to Kirk's home. That is where he will expect us to be. If he is in any condition to send a message, that is where he will send it."

"I will have the house manned by Security personnel around the clock, Commander," said Nogura. "I have some idea of what happens when the two of you take matters into your own hands and I will not tolerate your interference here. Kirk is dangerous enough to lose. You, Spock, hold an A7 computer rating and McCoy is one of our top surgeons and scientists. I do not know where Kirk is or who might be holding him, but I'll be damned if I'll let them grab all three of you!" He pressed the intercom on his desk. The door slid open to reveal a security detail. "You will accompany these gentlemen to your quarters immediately, where they will remain on constant guard. I do not suggest you try anything..."

There was nothing more to say. Nogura's expression told them he had given them all the warning he was going to. Silently Spock and McCoy left the room and were taken to their new quarters, virtual prisoners themselves and unable to help Kirk in any way.



The hours passed into days. Kirk lost track of the time they left him in his dark hole, stripped naked and vulnerable to their every whim.

He spent long hours withdrawing from the drug, his body screaming for the blessed injection, the blessed relief from the torment.

Tandy now used him as a plaything. He knew from what Trebe had said that Kirk would not be given back alive. It no longer mattered what Tandy did to him, except to make sure the withdrawal periods grew longer and longer.

The strong man who had first stood defiantly in front of him was gone, replaced by a creature who would do anything, say anything that Tandy wished in desperate hope that the alien might give him a shot. And Tandy toyed with him, teaching Kirk an intricate pattern which he had to go through in order to be rewarded by the drug, or, as often as not, dragged fighting and crying back to the darkness of the closet to continue his battle with the horrors of withdrawal. Kirk was not aware of the degradation, he only knew he had to do what he was ordered. Wasn't that what he had been doing all his life, obeying orders? His tortured mind saw no difference. It was just another set of orders from a different authority.

He no longer acted like the civilized being they had first captured. They had reduced him to less than an animal. Most of the time he was left in blackness, gagged and tied so he could not beg, could do nothing to relieve his agony.

When he was allowed brief minutes of freedom they let him crawl on his belly, begging in any way they required him to for the one thing that would relieve his dreadful agony, to beg for the chemical which would give him a brief respite from the raging madness of withdrawal, for the chemical that was destroying his life.

Large sores surrounded all the easily accessible veins on his arms and legs but he scarcely noticed when Tandy injected the drug through the painful ulcers, often putting more herrash directly into the muscle, causing more

swelling and burned flesh. Each time Tandy used the same syringe, the same dirty needle, but Kirk had stopped his struggling. Each time he saw it poised he would remain deathly still, praying that this time the needle would be injected. There was no more resistance. His fight had ended.



McCoy felt he had been pacing for hours and was sure he had worn a groove in the tile floor. During that time Spock had sat silent, never once glancing up at the restless human, seemingly unaware that McCoy was there at all.

It had been five days since they had been 'escorted' to their temporary quarters and they had not been outside since. A hundred times a day Spock would test the one door, but each time it was locked. They were on the top floor of the Officer's Barracks with a straight, certain fatal drop to the ground far below. Their options for escape were nil. They were there until Nogura decided otherwise.

McCoy's hand smashing down on the table caused Spock to glance up at him. "Damn it, Spock, it's been five days now and apparently Security hasn't found a trace of Jim!" He turned and started pacing again. "That monitor showed Jim's system was completely dominated by herrash. Humans can't stand the constant punishment of that drug. Jim's strong, but he's not that strong. God, if he's dead...!" McCoy's voice broke. He leaned against the wall, his forehead resting on the back of his hand. "If he died from that...! Spock, if we've failed him..."

"He is alive, Doctor," said Spock quietly. "I would have felt something if he had died."

McCoy wiped tears from his eyes as he turned to look at Spock. "I can't just sit here like this, Spock..."

"Nor can I," said Spock as he slowly got to his feet.

McCoy looked at him. He knew Spock had neither eaten nor slept since they had been locked in this 'prison'. He had done little better himself and knew how exhausted he felt. He also knew that Spock would feel nothing but building rage until he found Kirk. He had seen the Vulcan wound up like this too many times before.

"Then let's call Nogura..."

"No, Doctor. He must not suspect anything and you are in no condition to go anywhere. I shall search for the captain..."

"And just how do you propose getting out of here?" asked McCoy drily. "That's not exactly an honor guard outside our door."

"There are only two men left," said Spock. "I would presume that Nogura has every able bodied man out searching for the captain. He is very worried about the security risk..."

"Damn his security risk!" said McCoy viciously. "We're discussing a life!"

"You do not become Commanding Admiral of Starfleet Command by worrying about one life," said Spock flatly.

"Then I'll never make it," said McCoy.

A small smile touched the corners of Spock's mouth. "I have the same reservations about myself," he said.

McCoy smiled, appreciating Spock's attempt at quiet humor, then sobered. "Spock, you don't even know where to start looking, and Nogura specifically ordered..."

"Doctor, at the moment Jim is alive and somewhere in this city. His presence is strong in my mind. It is imperative I reach him as soon as possible. I do not suggest you try to stop me, and I warn you against contacting Nogura concerning my actions." He looked at McCoy for a moment, then turned and walked into his bedroom. For a moment McCoy stood in stunned silence, then hurried after the Vulcan.

"Blast it, Spock," he spluttered, "you know me better than that! Besides, I'm coming with you." He watched as Spock pulled the dark sweater over his head and straightened up, but didn't give him a chance to interrupt. "I've lost Jim," he muttered. "I don't want to lose both of you. Besides, you'll probably need a doctor." He grinned a little. "Do you know of many scrapes either of you have been in where you haven't needed me pounding to the rescue?"

"It might be dangerous," said Spock.

"Or Jim might truly have lost his mind."

"You don't believe that any more than I do," said Spock quietly. "However, I appreciate your company."

"Fine, I'm glad that's settled," said McCoy firmly. "Uh, how do we get out of here?"

"That should pose little difficulty, Doctor. Please dress in the darkest, oldest clothes you have here, and bring a medical kit if you have one."

"Right," said McCoy, feeling a spark of hope. At least now maybe they could do something. If they could just get out of here they might be able to find Kirk. And if anyone had a chance of finding him, it was Spock.



They pulled Kirk out of his prison for the last time. His body was bloody and filthy, his hair matted and tangled. He had been in withdrawal for a long time. They ignored his sobbing pleas, pleas that stripped him of any dignity he might have once had.

Trebe was with the others. It had taken him four days to discover the information he needed. It had given Tandy four days to work his destruction on Kirk. They forced Kirk into a chair and tied him tightly, knowing that if he managed to get loose, he would be very dangerous, desperate for the relief that herrash would give his screaming body, the herrash Tandy had been denying him.

"It appears that what you told us is the truth," said Trebe. "You apparently don't know who we are. But what was a man such as you doing in this part of the city?"

The gag had been removed from Kirk's mouth, but only soft animal sounds emerged, cries for mercy, cries for help, for relief.

A small smile crossed Trebe's face. "You have broken, Kirk. Think of it - the legend of Starfleet has been destroyed..." He reached down and pulled Kirk's head back, his hand holding the matted hair. Empty, dull eyes met his, the herrash seemingly having destroyed the vital intelligence that had made the man.

"Please...need...please..."

Trebe nodded toward Tandy. "You'll have to ask him, Kirk. He's the drug man here. But if he decides to let you have some, savour it. It will be the last you will get. We're leaving Earth and leaving you behind. You will never remember who we are - what we look like. Your brain will never again function as it once did." He stood looking at Kirk for a minute, then turned and left the room.

Eventually only Tandy was left. He stood waving the syringe in front of Kirk's face. "Do you want some, human?"

Dumbly Kirk nodded, open, naked longing on his face.

"Then you know what you have to do," said Tandy with a laugh. "You must show me everything you have learned to say please. If I untie you and you don't, then I'll smash this syringe, and it is the only shot left."

"No!" said Kirk in horror. "No, I'll...I'll do it...anything!"

Slowly Tandy untied Kirk, teasing him unmercifully, pretending to drop the syringe, to lose the needle. A dirty hand reached out as a whimper escaped Kirk's lips. He was so close. He would sell his soul for the relief that syringe held.

"Beg!"

Kirk begged. He was on his knees begging, then forced one step at a time to go through all the gruesome contortions that Tandy had forced him to learn. Finally he was crawling on his belly, still begging. Eventually Tandy gave him a shot in his ulcerated arm, not caring if any of the drug actually entered the vein. Then he wired Kirk's wrists and ankles together and stuffed the gag back into his mouth. He dragged Kirk to the closet and dumped him onto his side. Then the door shut and locked and Kirk was left to die slowly in his madness.



Spock and McCoy were sitting in exhausted silence in a small, dirty bar. They had been on the move for hours, carefully avoiding contact with any small groups of people. They had no way of knowing who might be from Starfleet security or who might even be the people who had taken Kirk and might, as Mogura had suggested, be looking for them.

McCoy took a deep swallow of his drink and grimaced as it hit his empty stomach. Spock had not touched his and McCoy knew he wouldn't. He had purchased it merely for show, and not to arouse any suspicions that might cause someone to remember that they had been there. McCoy picked up a stale nutraent stick from a bowl on the table and chewed it unenthusiastically. He couldn't afford to get drunk. Not now, not with so much at stake.

He glanced at Spock, worried about the slight glimpses of desperation the Vulcan had been showing. Maybe he should try talking, distract him for a few minutes. Spock had to relax a little or he was going to blow apart.

"Spock," he said quietly.

Dark eyes glanced up at him.

"Do you mind explaining to me now how we got out of Fleet Headquarters? Although I am aware of the fact that we merely walked out of our rooms and down the executive elevator, I still suspect your hand in there somewhere."

For a moment Spock looked at him, then dropped his eyes. The silence drew out and McCoy decided Spock wasn't going to answer.

"That's right, Spock!" he said, his anger rising. "Keep treating me like a fool you were forced to bring along and who keeps hampering your rescue attempts. As a matter of fact, you'd probably be just as happy if I was still back researching Fabrini medicine..."

Spock looked up again, this time letting some of his exhaustion and worry show. "Not at all, Doctor. You might possibly be the only person who can save Jim..."

McCoy couldn't remember hearing such a sound of near defeat in Spock's voice before. Instantly he was sorry he had lost his temper. "Spock, I..."

"It's all right, Doctor. We have been in this kind of situation before. Harsh words seem to be part of the

ritual." He took a deep breath. "As far as anyone knows, we are still being held at Starfleet. You will recall that there was only one guard when we left. I suggested to him that he had momentarily fallen asleep. When he checks, he will hear your voice saying that I am meditating and you are going to bed. He will want to believe that so he will not ask questions. And, as he will find the door still locked from the outside, there will be nothing to arouse his suspicions. Anyone contacting us will receive an appropriate answer from the viewscreen computer..."

"And I thought you had been sitting around for five days," said McCoy. "I should have known better."

"Have you rested sufficiently?" asked Spock, quickly changing the subject. "If so, I think we had best be on our way." Together they walked out into the dark night, not knowing where they were headed, but determined to find Kirk.

They had been walking for hours along the narrow, dimly lighted streets. Spock moved slowly, never once breaking his concentration, his mind always reaching out, searching for some trace of the familiar contact of Kirk's mind. He knew that Kirk was still alive, maybe terribly hurt, but alive, refusing the sentence of death that the demanding drug would be calling for.

McCoy was keeping up by dogged determination. He was too tired to care how long they had been walking, and he didn't dare think about how much further they would be going.

Suddenly Spock cried out in agony, clutching at his head as he staggered a few steps forward before collapsing onto his knees. Instantly McCoy's exhaustion was forgotten as he pulled out his scanner.

"Spock, what is it?" The scanner showed a tremendous variation in Spock's brain wave activity - cause unknown. McCoy put his hands on Spock's shoulders and shook him hard. "Spock, come on, snap out of it!"

His sharp voice seemed to break through. Spock looked numbly up at him, then slowly got to his feet. "I am all right, Doctor, thank you."

"What the blazes happened...?"

But Spock was no longer listening. His mind had turned inward and he stood motionless, his eyes unfocused. "I am being...bombarded...pain..." He visibly straightened. "I have found Jim, Doctor."

"What? How...?"

But Spock was already running forward, his quick strides forcing McCoy to sprint after him. McCoy made no attempt to distract the Vulcan. Spock obviously knew where he was going.

The locked door shattered under the strength of Spock's shoulder, and they burst into the deserted room. McCoy looked around.

"What are you up to, Spock? There isn't anybody here..."

Spock paid no attention to him. He walked across the room and practically unhinged another door as he pulled it open. The lock groaned and then splintered.

"Doctor...!" Spock's voice broke off and he stood frozen.

McCoy dashed across the room and dropped to his knees. "Oh, my God!" he breathed.

Kirk was thrashing against an unseen horror, his eyes open and staring, but seeing only the terror in his mind, that same terror that had only minutes before driven Spock to his knees as the confusion of Kirk's torment filtered into the Vulcan's empathic mind. Wire cord had embedded in the flesh of Kirk's wrists and ankles, buried deeply by his constant struggles. Large, suppurating sores covered his arms and legs.

McCoy pulled out his hypo and injected as much tranquilizer as he dared. Gently Spock removed the gag, then loosened the wire, biting his lip as he was forced to pull it from Kirk's flesh. Carefully he lifted Kirk from where he lay and brought him out into the main room.

McCoy swallowed hard as he read the medical tricorder. Herrash addiction and forced withdrawal, and all the physical and mental breakdowns that came with both. Grimly he brought out his hypo and dialed it.

"What are you giving him?"

McCoy glanced at Spock. "You know without asking. Someone has addicted his system to herrash and now he's in acute withdrawal. If he doesn't get more, he's going to be dead and I don't have any proper support medication that I can use as a substitute."

"Is it really necessary?"

"Look for yourself." McCoy handed him the tricorder. "Both his mind and body are being dangerously overtaxed by deprivation and hallucinations. His heart rate is practically off the scale. He's dehydrated. He's suffering from almost non-stop cramping and dry heaves. Heaven only knows when they started but they're going to continue until I can get him on the proper drugs." His mind softened. "One more shot isn't going to make that much difference."

Spock remained kneeling beside Kirk, his strong arms still wrapped around the now feebly struggling human. Pain showed deep in his eyes but he said nothing. McCoy pressed the hypo against Kirk's neck, his eyes grimly noting the

ulcerated sores that almost totally covered Kirk's arms and legs. *They would hurt like hell*, he thought to himself, *if Jim was still capable of feeling anything. Maybe in a way it's just as well that he's so out of it.*

The tricorder ran noiselessly until McCoy was satisfied that the drug was taking effect and some of Kirk's agitation was abating. Slowly he sat down on the floor, his knees violently protesting the length of time he had remained kneeling on the hard wood. Spock did not move from where he knelt, his arms wrapped around Kirk's upper body.

McCoy looked at Spock. "We're going to have to contact Starfleet. He's in bad shape..."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"Think, Doctor. What will Starfleet do if they receive him in this condition?"

"I don't know. Rehabilitation..."

"Exactly, and if he is not already destroyed, that will do it. I will not allow that to happen."

"Spock, it may already be too late."

"He is not going to be institutionalized. If he is unable to return to the man he was, I will take him home to Vulcan. I did not come back to be in Starfleet, I returned to be at his side, to be with him."

"What are you suggesting, Spock?"

Silently Spock shifted his position so he was also sitting on the floor with Kirk lying between his open legs, the human's back resting against his chest, the now lolling head back against the Vulcan's shoulder. Gently Spock moved the sweat drenched hair off Kirk's forehead, then again hugged him firmly. Finally he looked at McCoy. "I want you to treat him. Starfleet isn't to know."

"What? Spock, you're insane! Look at him! He needs to go to an advanced medical facility and even there it might not be enough..."

"What would you need to treat him?" Spock's stubborn eyes showed he wasn't through arguing.

McCoy looked at him, then at Kirk's now limp body, the herrash having taken him to a place none of them could follow, taken him to a deadly haven in the middle of madness.

"Well, to start with I'd need a hospital facility of some kind that had monitoring equipment, respirators, that kind of thing. Then I'd need free access to a large number of drugs, no questions asked. He's going to need IV's, protein nutrients, tranquilizers, heart support medication, synthetic support drugs to replace the herrash... Spock, I can't..."

"Doctor, no one knows Kirk better than you do. No one has a better chance of pulling him through. Think! There is a very good possibility that if we take him back to Starfleet that they won't let you anywhere near him. We've disobeyed direct orders from Admiral Nogura and you have already seen what his reaction is to life over institution."

McCoy looked back at Kirk, obviously wavering.

"I have complete faith in you and in your ability, McCoy," said Spock quietly, "and he deserves everything we can do for him. He didn't ask for this to happen. Would you desert him now?"

McCoy sighed quietly. He felt a stab of pride at Spock's words even though he realized it was a polished snow job. The Vulcan very rarely acknowledged McCoy's importance in Kirk's life and now he had practically underlined the necessity of his presence. Yet he was also afraid. Kirk was a very sick man and he was only going to get sicker. A human could live several years on controlled doses of herrash but not after severe withdrawal. The body was left too weak and damaged. They could no longer fight the terrible depletion of withdrawal, and their system was no longer strong enough to cope with the powerful chemical reaction of the herrash. In either case, they died.

"I could kill him, Spock. Do you think I could live with that?"

"Could you live with the knowledge of his death when you had no chance to help?"

Again McCoy fell silent. Spock knew he was very close to a decision. Then he felt Kirk start to shift in his arms.

"Doctor!"

Kirk jerked up out of Spock's hold, a horrible scream forced from his throat. He fell sideways, his body doubling up in pain. Instantly McCoy was at his side, pumping in muscle relaxants and tranquilizers. Finally Kirk lay still, dry heaves gradually relaxing their grip as the cramps slowly died away.

"The herrash didn't help much," said Spock quietly, almost accusingly.

McCoy swallowed hard. I hate to think how much of that stuff they were pumping into him. I gave him a pretty big shot... He got up and for a long time stood looking at what was left of the strong man he had known, torn by what he personally wanted to do and what medically he knew he should do.

Finally he looked around. "Are his clothes here, or a blanket, or something we can wrap him up in?" After

searching around, he found Kirk's clothes, torn and filthy, stuffed in the back of the closet where he had been imprisoned. "We can't put these on him," he said quietly. Further search brought a thin, tattered blanket, but it was better than nothing. Together they wrapped Kirk firmly, McCoy positioning Kirk's arms so they were trapped in the folds of the blanket. "That will make him easier to hold if he starts hallucinating again." Together they carried Kirk to an old, sagging bed in the corner of the room. "Spock, stay with him. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Spock's eyebrow rose in question.

"I've got an idea," said McCoy. "It's time I collected a few favors." After a last worried look at Kirk, McCoy left.

Spock sat on the side of the bed, his hand gently brushing across Kirk's forehead, trying to let the human know that someone was with him. But Kirk kept moving restlessly, his mind gripped by the horrors of the chemical and the raging needs of his body.

"It's all right, Jim," he said, not having any idea if Kirk could hear him or understand what he was saying. "McCoy's gone to get help."

Kirk grew steadily worse. Finally Spock was forced to firmly hold him down onto the bed. He injected some more of the tranquilizers that McCoy had left, but they seemed to be doing little good.

"There must be some way of getting through to you," said Spock as he fought with the human. Finally, in desperation, he grabbed Kirk's face, his fingers spreading quickly to the familiar entry points of the meld. Kirk fought wildly against the invasion, but the carefully wrapped blanket hampered his movements. Suddenly he fell limp and totally passive, leaving Spock no further resistance as his mind reached into the familiar passages of Kirk's mind.

He found no rational thought - no sanity met his probing, no essence of the man he had known as James Kirk met the meld. Kirk's mind was seemingly destroyed by the powerful narcotic, his mind destroyed for a reason none of them could understand.

Steeling himself, Spock probed deeper, past the layers of unconscious thought that was now only a blurred mass of need. He pushed through chaotic layers of confusion, desperately looking for a spark of life, and finding none.

For long moments he rested, trying to gain strength to probe deeper, to find some trace of sanity among the churning madness.

The whirling lights of insanity were all he found. There were no memories, nothing to grasp onto to bring the man back to himself. Again he thought of nothing, his mind reeling, trying to confront the destruction he was meeting.

Suddenly he realized that he had to get out. Kirk's insanity was rising up to claim him, threatening to overwhelm him. If he stayed any longer he would be pulled forever into Kirk's madness. He had already stayed too long. He didn't have time to build safeguards as he withdrew. With a loud cry, he ripped his mind free of the jumbled chaos and collapsed backwards onto the floor.

From far away he felt something press against his arm and almost instantly he felt sharp needles stinging through his system. Immediately a churning nausea hit his stomach and he knew that McCoy was back and had injected him with something.

He groaned and tried to sit up. Instantly McCoy moved to support him. "Take it easy, Spock. Don't exert yourself."

Spock opened his eyes. "Jim?"

"He's all right," said McCoy quickly, reassured by Spock's question that the Vulcan had suffered no harm. "Now, what the hell were you trying to do, kill yourself?"

Spock finally got into a sitting position. "He was so scared, so desperate. I tried to let him know I was here."

"Well," said McCoy gruffly, "at least you had the sense to pull out of it. I was almost ready to knock you out."

"You saw?"

McCoy nodded. "You had just started the meld when I walked in. Blast it, Spock, any fool would have known the dangers of entering that kind of mind! I've already told you once today that I don't want to lose both of you..." He swallowed hard. When he had first said that Kirk had still been missing and he had held the illogical human reaction of hope. Now he had only the horror of reality - he might yet lose one of them. "I still mean it," he finished lamely, knowing he had revealed too much by his words.

Slowly Spock got to his feet. "You said something about collecting favors earlier, Doctor."

McCoy frowned. Spock was refusing to accept the gravity of the situation, but now was not the time to argue

about it. "There's an ambulance on its way. I've arranged to have Jim taken to a private clinic outside the city. They've got everything there that we will need, and there will be no questions asked."

"Is it..."

"Spock, it's run by an old friend. When I explain to him what we're doing, he won't question. He's the original maverick. Anything that bucks authority has his full support." He turned back to Kirk who was starting to move restlessly again. "Mike's sending some support medication with the ambulance. I don't dare give Jim any more herrash, not the amount he obviously needs." He hesitated for a moment. "What sick, destructive people could have done this, to deliberately destroy a man in this fashion?"

"We will probably never know," said Spock quietly. "Jim has no memory of what happened, and I doubt if he ever will have. It will remain a blank forever. Whoever held him could hardly not have realized who he was. They are probably long gone from this city, possibly even from Earth itself. Escape would be simple. No one in authority knows who they are looking for, who to stop."

They were interrupted by the sound of an approaching airvan. McCoy moved quickly to the window and looked out. "It's the ambulance," he said with relief. "Wait here, I'll be right back." He thundered off down the stairs and a few seconds later Spock heard the ambulance start up again and leave. McCoy came back up the stairs two at a time, a small package in his hands.

"Told you we didn't have anything to worry about, Spock. I obviously got through to Mike even though I didn't say much. That van was sent as a decoy, just in case anyone was following. Mike's coming himself with another one and he's going to make sure he's not being followed." He put the package down. "Support drugs. At least we will have a fighting chance until Mike gets here!"

It was another half hour before a nondescript van pulled up in front of the dilapidated house. By then Kirk was quiet, the drugs blocking the worst of the hallucinations, taking the worst edge off the craving induced by his withdrawal.

A tall, burly man with a flowing red beard came up the stairs, a portable gurney under his arm. "Sorry I was so long, Len, but you sounded serious about keeping this quiet. What's up?" His eyes fell on Kirk's prone figure, then he glanced at Spock before he looked back at McCoy.

"I'll tell you on the way to the clinic, Mike," said McCoy. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"No problem," said Mike cheerfully. "I take it my driver made it."

McCoy nodded. "Not a moment too soon. We sure needed those drugs." He moved to the bed and with Spock's help, got Kirk transferred to the gurney. They took off the blanket, Spock fully expecting some comment from McCoy's friend on Kirk's condition, but none came. Kirk was efficiently wrapped in a soft blanket and strapped securely to the stretcher.

"All right, gentlemen," said Mike. "Shall we be off?"

Spock and Mike carried the gurney down to the waiting van. McCoy climbed into the back with Kirk, and Spock sat up front. On the way to the clinic, McCoy introduced the Vulcan and filled Mike in on what little they knew about what had happened.



The small suite of rooms was set out at the back of the clinic, isolated and soundproof. Here the battle for Kirk's life would be fought. Kirk probably had three days of life left at most before exhaustion would make him succumb to the tremendous demands of his body. They had three days to successfully complete the withdrawal.

Somehow they had to give Kirk enough supportive therapy to keep him going, and they were already fighting a losing battle. Kirk had been in withdrawal for a long time before they had found him - that meant hours of hallucinations, violent cramping, vomiting - all of which had drained him tremendously, maybe too much.

McCoy was just finishing tying the last strap of the soft harness when Spock came in. The Vulcan had gone with Mike to find out the latest news from Starfleet. Mike had friends in high places and could find out things that the Starfleet officers in their present situation could not.

"What's going on, Spock?"

"Security is still looking, Doctor, but apparently Admiral Nogura has convinced himself that Captain Kirk has indeed turned suicidal and taken his own life."

"Ha!" snorted McCoy, "that shows how much time he has taken to read Jim's profile tapes."

"How is he, Doctor?" asked Spock quietly.

"Not good," said McCoy, knowing he had to be honest. "I've treated all these damned ulcerated sores and started sonic treatments to heal the internal damage in the muscle tissue. I'd love to get my hands on that demented idiot who did this to him..."

"Is that harness necessary?" asked Spock as he looked at Kirk, soft cloth wrapped around the lean body, holding

Kirk's arms firm and strapping his body to the bed.

"It's for his own safety, Spock. You've seen how weak he is, how bad what little coordination he has left is. I don't want him to hurt himself..."

"What else?"

McCoy frowned. "Well, he's dehydrated. I've set up an IV, but I don't know how long the vein is going to hold out. I've only been able to find two that are much good, one in his foot, another on the back of his hand. Everything else is collapsed or so badly ulcerated that I hesitate trying to shove a needle through."

Spock nodded slowly, his eyes taking in the slow drip from the tubing that disappeared into Kirk's body.

McCoy glanced at the stockpile of drugs on the table across the room. "I've got everything I need to treat him except the two things I need most."

"Which are?"

"Strength and time," McCoy said quietly. "We're going to be fighting hallucinations, continuing dry vomiting and debilitating cramps and, worst of all, exhaustion. He won't be able to sleep and nothing we can give him will make him sleep. He's going to be fighting horrors we can't even begin to imagine, and he's not going to be able to escape them."

"Perhaps I could..."

"Don't you dare!" retorted McCoy. "You almost killed yourself once and what did it accomplish?" He smiled a little. "I'm sorry, Spock, I didn't mean to yell at you." He looked back at Kirk. "Most humans don't die from the withdrawal, they literally die of exhaustion. The herrash addiction can be beaten but most don't possess the strength. You've seen the tremendous spasms that keep shaking Jim, almost convulsions at times. It places a tremendous strain on the heart, and the terror living in his mind doesn't help. He's starting out down, and that's the only direction he's going to go. It will take nothing short of a miracle to pull him through."

Spock looked down at Kirk. "You are a doctor, McCoy. You can treat his body, give it the support it will need..."

"Or maybe I'll just subject him to the worst of hells before he dies."

A cold fear went through Spock at McCoy's words. The human was revealing feelings Spock had been scared were there. McCoy was very close to Kirk, maybe too close to be able to treat him effectively, to stand the amount of suffering that Kirk was going to have to undergo. Had he made a mistake? Firmly he shook himself. "He will not die," said Spock quietly. "I am going to wash and change, then I shall be back to relieve you so you can run those tests you mentioned earlier."

"Spock," McCoy's voice stopped the Vulcan in mid-turn, "are you sure we're doing the right thing?"

Slowly Spock turned back. "Doctor, which do you think he would accept - life as he knows it can be, or remaining the prisoner of a chemical that will eventually destroy him. He is not a man who gives up, but would you not agree that death is an acceptable alternative here?" After one last glance at Kirk, Spock turned and left the room.

For a long time McCoy stood in silence by the bed, then he sighed. *And what if you have broken?* he thought to himself. *I have seen what herrash can do. I have seen men who were reduced to less than animals. Was that done to you, Jim? If your mind has not been utterly destroyed, will that memory allow you to again be the man you were? I wonder if Spock truly recognizes the hell he has chosen for you - the hell I have assented to letting you face by agreeing to bring you here when I don't honestly know if I can do what is necessary to save you, to save your sanity...*

He looked at Kirk's open, yet unseeing eyes. He winced at the occasional whisper that escaped Kirk's lips, his chest heaving slightly as his body cried out for the blessed relief of the drug, relief that the support medication could not fully provide. McCoy set up another IV and started a solution of soluble protein nutrients. He checked the other IV which contained fluids and electrolytes. It was still properly adjusted. Within minutes Spock was back and McCoy was on his way to finish the blood tests that Mike had started for him earlier.



Kirk's screams filled the small room and his body was soaked with sweat as he fought against the soft restraints. Spock pushed Kirk's shoulders tightly against the bed, riding out the worst of the storm, unable to leave him long enough to contact McCoy. The room's soundproofing would not let the sounds filter past the walls.

The fight seemed to go on forever before Kirk's violent thrashing started to lessen. Gradually Spock relaxed his grip as Kirk subsided, but noted uneasily that there was still a wild look in the dull hazel eyes, eyes that had once been so full of sparkle and life.

"Jim?" Spock's hand reached out and touched Kirk's flushed face.

Kirk whispered and briefly fought the restraints that held him. He tried to speak but nothing intelligible came out.

"What is it, Jim?" asked Spock quietly. "Is there something you want?" Instinctively his hand moved to the entry points for the weld. There must be some way of breaking through.

Again only the blind whirl of need and madness met his brief probe. Almost instantly Spock pulled free, his face pale from the shock of meeting such unleashed emotion.

"What the hell?" McCoy's voice came from a great distance away. "Spock, what's happened? You look like you've just seen a ghost!" He grabbed his scanner and ran it over Kirk.

"Jim, he..." Spock swallowed hard. "He just had some sort of seizure. I couldn't let go of him long enough to call you."

"Damn," muttered McCoy, "his heart is going to give out if it goes much faster." He grabbed his hypo and injected a massive dose of tranquilizers and heart support medication. "Hold him still, Spock, I've got to get these IV needles reattached."

Kirk fought Spock's hold, fought McCoy as he tried to reinsert the needles. Tears ran down his face, mingling with the sweat from his long fight.

"Spock, get him a glass of water," said McCoy as he securely taped the IV tube to Kirk's leg. The Vulcan raised Kirk's head and held a cup to Kirk's lips. The human thirstily gulped at the liquid.

"Not too fast..." McCoy's warning was too late. Kirk's stomach rebelled as the liquid entered and great heaves shook his body.

Kirk finally lay exhausted, his body trembling from the additional abuse. Spock stood in frozen horror as McCoy finally released Kirk's head and rolled the shaking human onto his back.

"Well, it was a good idea while it lasted. I had hoped it might help stem some of his craving." He looked at Kirk. "I was obviously wrong. Come on, we'd better get him cleaned up."

They were silent while Spock held Kirk still as McCoy washed him. They both knew that Kirk was slipping although neither was willing to voice it. After Kirk was clean, McCoy started dressing the stubborn ulcerated sores that so far didn't seem to be responding to the medication.

"I've finished the lab tests," he said as he worked. "Jim has hepatitis." He glanced up at Spock. "He got it from repeated injections with a contaminated needle."

"A contaminated needle? I don't understand..."

McCoy shook his head in disgust. "He's had herrash injected by a needle and syringe. Undoubtedly that's how all these ulcerated sores occurred. Herrash destroys muscle tissue if it comes in direct contact with it. An air pressure hypo would never cause that contact, a needle and syringe would. I thought those barbaric things were obsolete years ago, but it's obvious that someone still uses one." He finished one side and with Spock's help they rolled Kirk over in a tangle of dressings and IV tubes. "He's very sick. Spock, and he's going to get a lot worse..."

"But he will live," Spock's words were half statement, half question.

"How much can he stand?" said McCoy, his voice threatening to break. "His mind can't support him. He doesn't know where he is, he doesn't know we're here. All he knows is that he is no longer getting herrash..." McCoy roughly brushed his hand across his wet eyes, then went back to changing the dressings.

"How will the hepatitis affect him?"

McCoy took a deep breath. "In this condition? Debilitating weakness, possible liver damage, probably jaundice. It's a tough strain, one that I haven't seen for years, not since I worked in the free clinic back in Atlanta when I first started practicing. The old skid row bums would have it...and most of them died."

"Surely there is a treatment for it," said Spock, unable to keep the worry out of his voice.

"Sure there is," said McCoy bitterly, "the same way as there is support medication for herrash addiction, heart support medication, tranquilizers for his seizures..."

"Then I don't understand the problem," said Spock sharply. McCoy wasn't making any sense, and he was obviously badly shaken by Kirk's seizure.

McCoy looked at him wearily. "Have you ever heard the term 'contraindicated'?" The Vulcan nodded. "Well," continued McCoy, "what Jim has come up with is a set of symptoms and complications where the normal medications working together would be certain to kill him. You can't use them together, not the most effective ones. We can't cure anything, Spock! All we can hope to do is to keep him comfortable enough to die with some dignity..."

"McCoy!" Spock's voice was even sharper.

McCoy shook his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. It's just that put down on paper, it looks so hopeless..."

"You cannot capture Jim's courage on paper, Doctor," said Spock quietly. "Why don't you try to get some sleep. I will stay with him."

"You'll call me if anything happens?"

Spock nodded. "Do not worry, you have written down every possible complication and what to do."

"All right, I guess I'm not much use to anyone in this condition anyway. I'll just take a quick nap."



McCoy slept for sixteen hours. He slept through the almost constant seizures that gripped Kirk. Spock made no effort to contact the sleeping human. He knew that McCoy was close to breaking, finding it almost impossible to divorce his feelings for Kirk from the cold demeanor that was necessary to successfully ignore the tremendous agony Kirk was undergoing. The less he saw, the better. The less he was around Kirk when he was out of control, the longer he would effectively be able to treat him. McCoy had said that Kirk had less than three days to live - Spock strongly suspected that McCoy had less time than that to be able to do his job effectively.

Spock held Kirk down as best he could during the most violent parts of the seizures. He replaced the IV needles that Kirk kept tearing from his arms and legs. He injected more tranquilizers as they became necessary and carefully monitored Kirk's vital signs, using support medication for both Kirk's heart and the herrash withdrawal when the monitors indicated that they were needed. He changed the IV bags as they emptied and kept a careful check on the dressings that covered the large part of Kirk's arms and legs.

Never once during those hours did Kirk relax, never once did he have more than a brief respite from the terrible raging needs of his body. But in those few precious moments of peace, those few minutes when he could relax, Spock had to endure the look in Kirk's eyes - the open, naked pleading. When he fought there was only fury and condemnation spurred on by the desperation of his need for the drug, but in those peaceful moments there was only confusion and betrayal and it was tearing at Spock's soul to see it.

Kirk had started his last seizure totally exhausted and was almost unconscious when McCoy finally made an appearance, unnoticed by Spock.

"One shot," he heard Kirk say in an exhausted, cracking voice. "God, don't do this to me!" His voice broke into a cry as he wrenched against the harness that was now thoroughly soaked with his own sweat. Spock grabbed Kirk's shoulders and held him firm against the bed. As McCoy moved to the side of the bed, Kirk was sobbing in desperation, pleading in a broken voice for the herrash, for an end to the suffering he could no longer endure.

Spock glanced up at McCoy as the doctor ran the tricorder. "How long was I asleep?"

"Sixteen hours."

"You had no right to treat him, Spock. I'm the doctor."

"There was nothing to be accomplished by waking you. I have recorded what I did, and his reactions..." He broke off as Kirk's struggles increased.

"How long has he been having seizures?"

"Almost since the time you left. Most of them die down after a short while. He has a few minutes rest before they start up again."

"A few minutes!" McCoy heard his voice rise in anger and clamped his mouth shut. Suddenly he knew why Spock had not called him. How long would he have allowed this to go on? He looked at the chart, trying to get his thoughts organized. "Has he been lucid for long?" he finally asked.

"Lucid?"

"Talking. Making sense."

Spock frowned. "I'm not sure. Off and on for most of the time. But I don't think he knows what is going on. His mind is focused solely on his own needs, his suffering. I have tried to explain to him what is happening but he doesn't appear to understand."

"What about the meld, and what's this Sadag he keeps mentioning?"

Spock looked at him sharply but didn't bother to deny that he had tried again. "Nothing," he said with finality, cutting off any more questions about either subject.

A sudden scream was torn from Kirk's throat and he ripped loose from Spock's grip, sending the Vulcan sprawling backwards onto the floor. McCoy tried to inject more tranquilizers but couldn't connect with Kirk's thrashing body. Spock finally sprawled across Kirk to hold him so McCoy could keep the hypo held still long enough to give the injection. He stayed in that position until Kirk finally subsided again and McCoy had time to reconnect the IV needles yet again.

"His mind is going to give in soon," said McCoy, not looking at Spock. "He's not going to be able to take much more."

"He is still fighting. He will survive..."

Spock was startled by McCoy's hand twisting him around. "Blast you! Last week I admitted to myself that you had finally let yourself feel, but you don't feel anything! Because of your selfishness, you are causing a man you claim to love to suffer more than any man should ever be asked to do. Because of your selfishness! I never would

have believed it of you, Spock, but what you are doing to Kirk now makes me sick!"

"You are a willing part of it, Doctor."

"Like hell I am!" retorted McCoy. He turned and stormed out of the room.

Spock slowly straightened his tunic as he looked down at Kirk. Was he being selfish? Was he making Kirk fight a battle that he shouldn't be asked to fight? Was he making the human suffer so that he could live with a clear conscience? No, the fight was for Kirk who could no longer make the decision to fight. It was for Kirk's life, not for his own.



As the hours passed, Kirk slipped noticeably. He was too tired to keep fighting and too desperate not to. His seizures were growing ever more violent, and it was taking most of Spock's strength to hold him, to prevent him from tearing loose. Occasionally Spock would try to reason with him, even though it was useless. Kirk never appeared to understand anything he said, only cried out for what he needed.

McCoy was becoming an increasing liability. He was at the breaking point, exhaustion and personal involvement threatening to interfere with his medical competence. Spock had stopped calling him when Kirk had a relapse. If McCoy was there, Spock would defer treatment to him, otherwise he coped with Kirk's struggles by himself, holding him until exhaustion overcame the human and he would lie quiet for a short time.

Never once did Kirk sleep, the withdrawal would not allow the exhausted body to yield. He cried and pleaded with Spock and McCoy for relief, no longer able to think of anything except the peace the herrash would bring.

They were side by side when the latest seizure struck. Together they fought with Kirk, then McCoy reached out for the hypo. "I'm giving him herrash," he said firmly. "I won't let this keep happening. Spock, his mind has been destroyed by that drug. The spark that made him James Kirk is gone. There's nothing left to reach. He's only an empty shell, there's only want and need with no mind left to understand why. Admit it, he's lost and he's dying..."

Spock smashed the hypo from McCoy's hand. "No!"

McCoy looked back at Spock, fury infusing his face. "Spock, face it, he's being destroyed. His mind probably is already destroyed. What sense is there in making him undergo any more of this torture? He'd be better off with controlled doses and letting him die without having undergo any more agony..."

"He survived untreated withdrawal long enough to let us find him..." Spock's voice broke as he remembered the terrible sight of Kirk lying helpless in the dark, stinking closet.

"Spock..."

"I said no!"

"Damn it, he's a human being. There's only so much that he can take, and I can stand to watch! Maybe as a Vulcan you can control that steel trap mind and deny his suffering, but I can't...!"

"Get out!"

"What...?"

Spock let go of Kirk's thrashing body and grabbed McCoy, flinging him bodily out of the room, locking the door behind him.

"Spock!" McCoy hammered on the door. "Damn you, let me in!" His banging was almost drowned out by Kirk's screams. Spock didn't have time to deal with both, and right now Kirk was more important. He would face McCoy later.



Kirk was finally quiet. He lay breathing heavily, his hair plastered against his face, almost comatose from exhaustion. Spock unlocked the door, not surprised to see McCoy sitting in the corridor outside.

"It is over, Doctor," he said quietly. He turned back into the room and walked over to Kirk, putting his hand on the harnessed arm. "Jim, listen to me. You are safe now. McCoy and I are both here. Someone has addicted you to herrash and we are trying to break that addiction. Jim, do you understand?" He had tried those same words a hundred times, hoping that somehow Kirk would hear and understand him, yet knowing each time he said it that it wasn't happening.

As before, only a brief struggle met his touch. But this time the struggle was very weak. Kirk had absolutely nothing left to fight with. He had come to the end of his strength - the end of his fight. Sighing slightly, Spock got some hot water, then unstrapped Kirk and took off the harness. He needed to be washed, the sores treated and more IV's started. Spock was getting some soap on the cloth when he heard a sickened gasp from McCoy.

He turned and froze. Kirk was no longer on the bed, but had somehow found the strength to hump himself onto the floor. Kirk's hand groped upwards. "I obey...order," he gasped. "I...beg...crawl...please, give...shot...will do...what...you want..."

In speechless horror, Spock and McCoy watched as Kirk went through the ritual he had been forced to perform each time Tandy played with him, sometimes rewarding him with the drug, other times forcing him screaming in terror back to the closet to fight the terrible cravings of withdrawal in his black hole. Kirk might be beaten by the drug but he still had enough will to try one more time. Spock felt the bile rising in his throat at the terrible degradation. It was not a man who was groveling at his feet, it was a beaten, broken animal.

With a wounded denial, Spock fell to his knees, gathering Kirk into his arms. Small, pleading cries met Spock's action, whimpers forced from a body that was desperately craving what it was being denied, and being denied for a reason it could not understand. He had done everything he was supposed to. What else did they want?

"Spock, you can't let him go on like this!" Spock looked up to see McCoy standing in the doorway, his face deathly white from shock. "Would he have done that if he had not broken? Could you conceive of any man, much less James Kirk, doing something like that if his mind had any control of his body? Spock, the support drugs aren't working. Let me give him some herrash and stop this torture!"

"No, Doctor," said Spock quietly as he lifted Kirk back onto the bed. "He's come this far. He goes all the way."

"Damn you, Spock!" snapped McCoy, "you can see what sort of hell he is being subjected to. What further hell are you going to make him undergo before he dies?"

"He will not die," said Spock as he began to wash Kirk. He glanced up at McCoy. "I would appreciate your help, Doctor," he said quietly.

With sullen anger, McCoy moved forward and helped Spock wash the exhausted man, change the soiled dressings and re-establish the IV tubes. Then he ran a scanner over Kirk, his eyes finally meeting Spock's. "Do I need to say it?" he asked quietly.

"No," said Spock. He knew the scanner showed that Kirk was dying.

"Well, I'll say it anyway..."

"Doctor, that is enough!"

For a moment they stood glaring at each other, then McCoy's eyes dropped. "I'm sorry, Spock, I know what you're going through. It's just so unnecessary..."

"Doctor," interrupted Spock, "I should like to be alone with the captain for a short time."

McCoy's eyes darted to Spock's face. "You're not planning on doing anything foolish?"

Spock smiled slightly. "I appreciate your concern, Doctor, but rest assured my mental state is more settled than yours. No, I am not planning on doing anything foolish. I just wish to be alone." For a moment Spock hesitated as though he was going to say something more, then obviously changed his mind.

"All right," said McCoy reluctantly, "but if you run into trouble, let out a holler."

"I shall do that," replied Spock. For a moment they stood looking at each other, then McCoy turned and left.

★
Again Spock entered the mad blackness of Kirk's mind. It was the last meld he would attempt. If this didn't work, he would let McCoy have his way and Kirk would be given controlled doses of herrash, carefully monitored and regulated until death decided to free him. He would not be forced to go through any more suffering.

This time Spock met no resistance to his probe. Kirk's exhaustion would not permit him the luxury of resistance. Spock quickly passed through Kirk's subconscious and went straight into the depths of his madness.

He paused for a minute, his mind having a difficult time trying to absorb the whirling confusion and needs of Kirk's tortured mind.

For some reason, the words of the song returned to Spock, the soulful cry of someone centuries earlier, crying out as he cried out now. And, in a dark corner of Kirk's madness, a tiny light appeared - a tiny thought formed and slowly grew to stand as a symbol.

A rose...

Cautiously Spock's thoughts reached toward it. He did nothing to call Kirk. He thought only of the song and its pleading words. Gradually the image of the rose stood clear, a solitary, fragile beacon in the midst of raging madness.

Spock stayed just long enough to assure himself of one other thing, then quietly began to withdraw. It was all he dared do. If he stayed in Kirk's mind any longer, he would be pulled forever into his madness. He hoped he had given Kirk enough to hold onto. He had given him a memory - a want and a need. Spock hoped it would prove stronger than the chemicals that controlled Kirk's body now.

★
The room was dark when McCoy returned. For a moment he felt panic surface. He knew that Kirk was close to total insanity, and that insanity could have overpowered Spock. Kirk was an expert at dirty gutter fighting and his

nearness to insanity would make him that much more dangerous.

McCoy flipped on the light and stood in silence for a moment. Kirk lay unmoving on the bed, Spock sitting in a chair by his side, his fingers steepled in front of him. He glanced up as McCoy came in.

"He is stronger, Doctor."

McCoy looked at the scanner readout. There was no doubt that what Spock said was true. Kirk was still in withdrawal, but he was not nearly so close to death.

McCoy carefully gave Kirk a small sip of water and tensely waited for a reaction. None came. He sponged Kirk's face and then his body. "We need clean sheets, Spock," he said, "these are a mess." Efficiently they changed the bed, the whole time McCoy acutely aware that flickers of intelligence were showing in Kirk's eyes, even though he did not speak.

McCoy took off the harness. For a moment Kirk tensed, obviously fighting some deep, inner drive. In horror McCoy realized what it was that Kirk was fighting. His eyes flew to Spock's face and found the dark eyes locked on his. Neither of them could say anything, and both knew they would not be able to bear the sight if Kirk repeated his earlier act of begging.

In desperation, Kirk clutched onto the sheet. His memories of the last few days were a blank, but he did remember how he had been taught to beg and he remembered the relief as his willing body had dragged his screaming mind toward something horrible, although he couldn't remember what it was. It was the relief he remembered most.

Kirk's movement broke Spock's frozen stance, and he reached forward, his hands covering Kirk's whitened fingers. "Hold on, Jim," he said softly as Kirk started to pull away.

Kirk looked up at him, then at the lean, warm hands that covered his own cold, trembling ones. He opened his mouth. "Please...he...help..."

Spock's hands closed harder as he felt Kirk's grip loosen. "No, Jim, don't!" Kirk pulled away from him and crawled to the edge of the bed. McCoy caught him as he slipped off and pulled him to his feet, his arms going tightly around Kirk's shaking body.

"Jim, listen to me. Somehow someone managed to addict you to herrash. That's what's driving you, but you're winning. Don't crawl! Don't get yourself into a position where you can't stand to live with yourself! Please!"

A wounded cry escaped Kirk and he pulled away from McCoy, slowly falling to his knees, his hands grabbing, pleading. McCoy looked helplessly at Spock. Kirk was losing the battle. Whatever had brought him this far was being overpowered by his far greater need for the drug.

Immediately Spock was around the bed and on the floor beside Kirk. He grabbed Kirk's shoulders. "Think, Jim, the rose. Hold onto that image! Remember the glow - the hope? Jim - think! Reach into your mind!"

Gradually Kirk stopped shaking. His eyes cleared slightly. "Rose?" he said softly. He looked at Spock. For a long time their eyes held, then Kirk reached up and touched the Vulcan's face. "Spock?" It was the first moment of recognition, the first evidence that his brain was not utterly destroyed.

"Yes, Jim," said Spock, wondering in the back of his mind how he was managing to remain so calm. "Come, you cannot remain on the floor." Carefully he got up, lifting Kirk with him and helping him down onto the bed. "Doctor, I would suggest treating him now. He should remain calm for a while."

Kirk lay quiet under McCoy's ministering hands, although McCoy wasn't being quite as successful in controlling his tears. When they had finished, Spock and McCoy eased the soft harness back on. They stayed with him for a while, but Kirk continued to remain calm.

Finally McCoy looked at Spock. "How long has it been since you've eaten anything?"

Spock shrugged. He didn't know and he didn't care.

"There's some food in the next room. I think it's about time you ate something before you fall flat on your face. As a matter of fact, I'll join you. We can keep an eye on him from out there."

Suddenly Spock realized that he was starving. "I'll get things ready," he offered.

Ten minutes later McCoy came out and sprawled into a chair. "There's been no further slipping," he said in response to Spock's unasked question. "I was able to finally run some simple brain scans. By some miracle his brain does not appear to be damaged."

"The hepatitis?"

McCoy shook his head slowly. "It's got a good hold, but it's no worse. However, there are preliminary signs of jaundice, some yellowish staining of his eyes. He's not out of the woods yet." He glanced up at Spock. "I don't know what you did to reach him. Oh, don't try to deny it. I can see your handiwork in all of this. I would have lost him this afternoon," he continued quietly, "probably for good. Thank God you were there..."

"No, Doctor," said Spock quietly, "someone a few centuries ago knew what Jim was going through. That person touched his mind, not me."

McCoy looked at him curiously but the guarded look in Spock's eyes told McCoy that the Vulcan was not about to explain further. "Well, I suppose you would defend that as a logical statement," said McCoy, "but I doubt if you'd ever find a believer." He pushed his fork into a pile of mashed potatoes. "However, I am worried about his continued desperate craving for the herrash, Spock, and he's plainly terrified. He's still got a tremendous uphill struggle in front of him."

"He will win, Doctor."

McCoy glanced at him. "You can't win someone else's fight, Spock, not even with your willpower. If that was anyone else lying in there, I would disagree with you...actually, I'm inclined to disagree with you anyway. You were gone a long time - maybe too long. He's not a Vulcan."

"Indeed not, Doctor," replied Spock, "but he is James Kirk."

McCoy fell silent. There was no use going through the argument again. He knew he wouldn't win and he knew that Spock would never accept anything he said anyway.

After dinner, Spock left to sit with Kirk. Kirk was awake but withdrawn, showing no sign that he knew Spock was there. Spock felt his anger rise as he watched the even rise and fall of Kirk's chest. Why had he been subjected to this? What had happened to him? Spock knew from the meld that Kirk had no memory of what had happened, nor ever would have. It would remain a blank part of his life if he should indeed live.

A restless stirring brought Spock out of his daydream. Instantly he was at Kirk's side. Kirk's small cries tore into Spock, the sounds of a wounded animal begging for mercy, the cries of Kirk's addiction. The sounds brought McCoy running.

Together they desperately tried to avert another seizure, tried and failed. Kirk started to fight with more strength and the two of them had their hands full holding him as still as they could.

Finally Kirk looked at Spock. "Why?" The word was a gasp from a tortured body.

"Jim," said Spock levelly, his stomach banging against his throat as he realized how badly Kirk was slipping. "You've got to win. You cannot give in to domination by a chemical. You cannot destroy your life..."

"Please, give me...!" A scream followed close on his words. Spock grabbed his shoulders and again held Kirk firmly against the bed. The healing meld had obviously been destroyed by the drug's more powerful hold.

Finally the seizure subsided. Kirk had fought Spock every inch of the way, just as he had before the meld. Spock sagged back, suddenly wondering how much more he could take, the first time such a thought had ever entered his mind.

Kirk's haunted, pleading eyes held his for a long time, then he drew a shuddering breath. "No...no more. Please...let me...die!"

"Jim, you can't give up!"

Kirk did not answer. His eyes gradually grew unfocused. He did not appear to have heard Spock's anguished cry. He was withdrawing for the final time, preparing himself to meet the death he was finally ready to accept.

Spock suddenly knew he had to get out, get away from the tortured man. He roughly pushed past McCoy who was standing in the doorway, and practically ran to the door that led to the small yard surrounding the clinic. His mind was a whirl of confusion. Had he been wrong to reach out for Kirk's consciousness, for that spark that made Kirk the person he was? Now Kirk's mind clearly felt the agony and obviously recognized that he was dying. Would it have been kinder to have left Kirk in the twilight of nothingness? Should he have interfered? He paced in the dark night, his ragged emotions threatening to rip open and pull him apart.

McCoy started to follow Spock, then thought better of it. It was time to follow his own instincts, to stop being swayed by the determination of cold logic. He knew herrash addiction and he knew Kirk's strength, but the drug was stronger. It was nothing short of a miracle that Kirk's mind had not already been destroyed, but otherwise the drug was following classic lines. There had only been the one, brief sign that the agony of withdrawal was easing.

He stopped in the doorway and looked at Kirk, and again in his mind he saw the gruesome spectacle of Kirk groveling on the floor, begging for the drug that would destroy his life, willing to do anything for its relief. James T. Kirk, Admiral, Starfleet Command. James T. Kirk, Captain, U.S.S. Enterprise. James T. Kirk, addict. Just when Kirk's life had been given back to him - all their lives - this had to happen. Kirk had fought successful battles all his life, often against overwhelming odds, but he couldn't fight this - no human could. Slowly, sadly, McCoy took the hypo out of his medikit. Kirk would eventually die, but at least he would be able to die with dignity.



His mind was finally blessedly dark, no wild images filling it as they had been, causing helpless terror and despair. Again he saw the soft light and focused on that as it slowly grew closer. The image was fuzzy, indistinct,

and settled slowly into a pattern. A fragile flower grew in his mind, its petals reaching out to an unseen light. Kirk moved restlessly on the bed. He wanted to find the source of that light but he was being held down, forced away.

"No," he muttered, "please, I must...can't go...no...!"

McCoy hesitated by the side of the bed. What horrors was Kirk seeing now? The hazel eyes were open but utterly blank, the dark rings of suffering looking like black smudges on the pale face. What was Kirk feeling? The hypo lay heavily in McCoy's hand, its drug ready to relieve agony that had been prolonged far too long.

Kirk gradually relaxed. The light seemed to be getting stronger now. The rose enfolded him in the softness of its petals, sheltering him, the thorns protecting him from further torture. The light grew brighter and the white-hot blaze gradually took on shape and form until there was no mistaking the features.

"Spock!"

Far out in the yard, Spock's mind heard Kirk's cry. With no hesitation he ran for the clinic. He had no idea why Kirk had called out for him, he only knew he was needed.

As Kirk cried out, McCoy dropped the hypo he had just pressed against Kirk's arm. Before he could retrieve it, Spock burst into the room.

"What are you doing?" he demanded harshly, catching McCoy's wrist before he could reach for the hypo.

"What I should have done hours ago!" said McCoy fiercely. "I won't put him through this any longer. Do you think I haven't heard his screams, his pleas? Spock, he's dying, and he's got to be allowed to die with dignity!"

But Spock was no longer paying any attention to what McCoy was saying. He dropped McCoy's wrist and moved slowly to the bed.

Kirk was lying on his back, his sweat damp hair plastered to his face, the deep lines of suffering still clearly etched. But his eyes were closed, the long lashes lying unmoving on the flushed cheeks. His chest was rising and falling in the peaceful movement of deep sleep.

"Doctor...?"

McCoy grabbed his scanner and stared almost incomprehendingly at the readout. Finally he handed it to Spock, his hand trembling.

Spock looked at the scanner and, for a brief moment, closed his eyes. The withdrawal was complete. Kirk had survived it. Somehow he had won.

McCoy bent down to retrieve the hypo, tears filling his eyes and a cold fear clutching his heart. He had been so close to giving Kirk the shot - so close to addicting him forever to the herrash's uncompromising hold. Only Spock's blind faith had stopped him from trying to do it before then, and only God knew what had prevented him from doing it now.



From the moment McCoy contacted the medical complex at Fleet Headquarters, Starfleet was in an uproar. Admiral O'Connor had everything ready that McCoy had asked for when Mike's dilapidated airvan drew up to the emergency entrance.

Nogura was there to meet them, the wrath of his office surrounding him like a mantle, but McCoy cut right through him. "This is my patient, Admiral, and at the moment he is a very sick man. I will not have any of your heavy footed infantry crashing around me or my Sickbay!"

"Your Sickbay?" spluttered Nogura.

"Yes, sir. And it is imperative to Kirk's recovery that Commander Spock be with him at all time. I will let you know when he is strong enough to talk to you."

"But you're A.W.O.L...you're..." But there was no one left to listen to Nogura's raging. The stretcher carrying Kirk was thundering down the hallway on its way to the intensive care unit, Spock and McCoy running along side. Mike loaded the empty stretcher back into his van, laughing at the ludicrous sight of the Commanding Admiral standing on the sidewalk yelling at thin air. Giving him a cocky salute, he got in the van and drove off.

McCoy set up a battery of tests now that he had all the advanced equipment he needed. He knew that Nogura was out for blood and he'd better be prepared with every test in the book to back himself up. Kirk's life and career were still hanging in the balance.

O'Connor had rounded up every expert that Starfleet had, and Kirk was given the best possible treatment. An entire team worked nonstop to find a combination of drugs that wouldn't kill Kirk while he was recovering from all the complications caused by the addiction. Within days he was stable, his blood count and bodily functions gradually returning to normal.

Kirk's sleep was so deep as to be almost comatose. At first McCoy had been worried, but the specialist had assured him that it was a natural healing process.

Kirk slept for almost a solid week. Occasionally he would wake up for brief periods, groggy and disoriented, his body still terribly weak from the ordeal it had undergone, but within minutes he would be asleep again, a deep healing sleep.

During this time Spock never left Kirk's side. He would help McCoy treat the now healing sores on Kirk's arms and legs. He would tell the nurses when the IV's needed to be changed. He kept careful records of anything Kirk said or did during those brief periods when he was awake.

Ten days after Kirk arrived at the medical complex, they managed to arrest the hepatitis. After three weeks all tests showed that there was no sign of any drug dependence, no sensitivity to harrass derivatives, nor any dependence on the pure drug itself. Kirk's waking periods were growing longer and more lucid. It was time for McCoy to face Nogura.

"I will come with you, Doctor."

"No, Spock, I'd rather you stayed here with Jim. If he wakes up, he'll need you. Don't worry, I won't do anything to upset the admiral."

"I would imagine your presence will be enough to do that," said Spock with the ghost of a smile. "I wish you luck."

McCoy nodded. "I have the feeling our future in Starfleet might depend on this. I accept your wishes."

Nogura kept McCoy waiting but if he was using it as a tactic to upset McCoy, it didn't work, nor did any of his angry tirades. McCoy simply handed him all the test results and reports, and answered all Nogura's questions with the calm competence of his experience and position. In medical matters, McCoy did not cow easily.



Spock did not notice when Kirk had awakened. When he looked up, the hazel eyes were resting on him, eyes which now held the flame of life and not just the feeble flicker that had been present earlier.

"Welcome back, Jim," he said quietly.

"Um." Kirk looked around. "Where am I?"

"Medical complex, Fleet Headquarters."

Kirk lay silent for a moment. "Funny place to be. Did something happen?"

Spock stood up. "You were very sick for a while, but you're fine now. When you are feeling stronger we can discuss it more thoroughly." He hesitated, but McCoy had told him to ask. "How do you feel?"

Kirk thought about it for a moment. "Pretty awful," he conceded. He glanced at the IV hook-ups that were attached to his arm and leg. "Looks like I must have lost my appetite." He looked down. "My arms don't look too good either." He was silent for a moment, then he looked at the Vulcan. "Spock, am I yellow or is it the light?"

Spock almost smiled as the questions came tumbling out. Kirk was definitely on the mend. "I would suggest keeping your questions for your doctor. He knows more than I do."

"McCoy?"

Spock nodded.

"Where is he?"

"With Admiral Nogura, waging what I suspect could turn out to be the battle of the century."

Kirk looked confused. "What has Nogura got to do with anything?"

"Jim, I'll explain everything later, but you need to rest. Please believe me when I say there is nothing to worry about."

"Okay," said Kirk dubiously. He settled back into the pillows and was silent for a long time. Spock thought he had drifted off to sleep when suddenly he spoke. "Spock, how did you know about the rose?" His eyes opened. It was obvious he remembered something of the past days. He knew who had put the symbol of hope in his mind.

"Dr. McCoy was watching the videotape the night you went out to dinner with Admiral Nogura. I watched the end of it."

For a while Kirk was silent. "Did it make sense to you?" he asked finally.

Spock nodded. "Yes, it made sense." Their eyes met in quiet understanding but McCoy walked in before either one of them could say anything more.

"I did it, Spock! Not damn, I got him on every point! We're still in Starfleet!"



Nogura didn't give up without a fight, but he had picked on three men who refused to yield.

Eventually McCoy decided that Kirk was strong enough to go through one of Nogura's grilling sessions, but the admiral came away empty handed. He had gone into Kirk's room determined to discover exactly what had happened to him, and he had failed. From the time Kirk had walked out of the Officer's Club at Fleet Headquarters to the time he had finally woken up in the intensive care unit at the base hospital was a complete blank. All tests showed a total

memory loss. Kirk simply had no idea where he had been or what had happened to him.

As Nogura got up to leave, Spock silently stepped forward. "May I speak with you a moment, sir?" he asked quietly, fully aware of McCoy's puzzled gaze but not taking his eyes from the Commanding Admiral.

For a moment Nogura returned his look, then nodded abruptly. "Very well, Commander, come with me."

Once they were in Nogura's office, the admiral gestured Spock to a chair while he sat on the corner of his desk.

"Well?"

"Sir, I am aware of what you were attempting to discover when you were talking to Captain Kirk..."

"Admiral Kirk, Commander Spock."

A faint smile touched Spock's lips as the meaning of Nogura's words sank home. "Yes, sir, Admiral Kirk." He paused for a moment, then continued. "I had occasion to achieve a mind meld with Admiral Kirk several times during his withdrawal from the herrash..." He felt Nogura's eyes boring into him. "Admiral, have you ever heard of an organization called Sadag?"

For a moment Nogura looked blank, then recognition dawned in his eyes. "That's some insignificant renegade outfit, isn't it? Occasionally pirate old freighters, that sort of thing?"

"Yes, sir," replied Spock. "It was they who abducted Kirk."

Nogura looked at him in bewilderment. "What earthly reason would they have for doing something as stupid as that?"

"Unknown, sir. Quite likely they didn't realize who it was they had when they first took him, but you can rest assured that as soon as they knew they got out of there in a hurry. If they were indeed based on Earth they are no longer."

"No," agreed Nogura, "they wouldn't risk being caught anywhere in this sector." He sat musing while Spock slowly got to his feet.

"Admiral," he said softly, "during the last meld I had with Kirk, the madness was abating and I took the opportunity to check. There was no breakdown of command training. There was no evidence that there had ever been any attempt to force information, and none that any had been given."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"No, sir," said Spock. "However, I believe his psyche tests will show no breakdown. I highly doubt if he was taken for any knowledge he possessed. I think it was just one large, almost high cost error which will never be repeated."

"We shall see, Commander," said Nogura abruptly. "If his psyche tests don't coincide exactly with the previous ones done on him, he is out, do you understand me? If he has broken in any way, he is grounded for good!"

Spock nodded. "He did not break, sir." Nodding formally, Spock turned and left.



McCoy made sure that Nogura was present at all of Kirk's psychological testing. This was not a man grown so weak that he wanted to die. Kirk had won a battle with herrash addiction. No man with any form of self-destructive tendencies would have been able to do it. Exhaustive psyche tests confirmed Spock's statement. There was no breakdown of command training. For all the hell he had been through, Kirk had stood up to Nogura again and shown him the man he was. Nogura finally admitted defeat and let Kirk resume command of the *Enterprise*, the ship he had almost taken away from him again. He finally admitted that he was never going to win his argument with Kirk, he might as well let him go.



Finally the day came when Kirk was released from the hospital and allowed to go home, accompanied by a hovering McCoy. Spock had had to chair a debate at one of the science seminars and was unable to meet them at the hospital. McCoy was overjoyed at the normality of the man at his side. Kirk had been so desperately sick, so close to total destruction that it was hard to believe that he could once again be whole.

Laughing off McCoy's mothering, Kirk escaped to his room pleading the need of a hot bath and a change of clothes. He shut his bedroom door firmly behind him, half afraid that McCoy would follow him in. From the talks he had had with McCoy, he knew the doctor still felt guilt at almost readdicting him to herrash and that was one of the reasons he was hovering so closely. He put his suitcase down on the floor and looked around, savoring its familiarity.

Walking across the room, he pulled the curtains open and the sunlight streamed across the bed, outlining a single rose that lay on the pillow. Slowly he walked to the bed and picked it up, along with a tape which lay beside it. He put the tape in the player and turned it on.

Familiar words filled the room as he sat on the bed, the tormented words he knew so well now taking on a new

meaning, a new hope.

He was still sitting there when a quiet knock sounded on the door and Spock entered. He saw Kirk with the flower in his hand, the words of the song softly filling the air. He shut the door quietly behind him.

Their eyes met for a moment, then Kirk looked down at the rose. "Is this a commitment, Spock?" he asked.

"If you like."

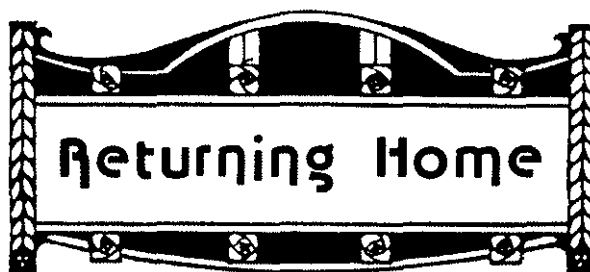
Kirk looked up, then slowly got to his feet. "Love is truly a hunger. It can and will tear you apart if it is allowed to."

"Then we must never allow it."

Kirk stood looking at the Vulcan. "How far, Spock? How much do we give?"

Spock's eyes held his steadily. "It is not something to push, Jim. We've come this far. Who is to say what the future holds?"

"Who is to say what the future holds?" echoed Kirk. For a long moment he looked at the rose, then he looked at Spock. Each was a gentle protector. Each was a promise of love. A small smile touched Kirk's lips, a smile that was reflected in the peace of the Vulcan's eyes - a silent promise of what was to come...



"So, this is your home..." Spock looked appreciatively at the house that Kirk and Lori had painstakingly reclaimed from the almost total ruin it had been. There was nothing of the modern here - the stone had originally been quarried from the native formations, the glass of the windows showed the lead edgings usually found in houses hundreds of years old.

The house was Kirk, a house that went back to the roots that also held him. It was large, but not gaudy. The lawns around it were neatly set out - hedges substituted for flowers. It was masculine, it was comfortable.

Kirk looked at Spock almost shyly. This was the first time the Vulcan had been here, the first time they had had shore leave since their encounter with Vegur. Weeks had gone by since then as they had given the *Enterprise* the most thorough shakedown any ship had ever undergone.

During those weeks the unique friendship he and Spock had once shared was found again. That day in Sickbay, Spock had made a commitment to live, not merely to exist as a cog in a wheel but to live as he should, and to live at Kirk's side. And Kirk watched with satisfaction as everything once again fell into place - Spock and McCoy 'fighting', Scotty crooning over his engines, and the bridge crew even more efficient than they had been before. They had gone home again, and proved it could be done.

Now they were back on Earth. They had spent a few days at Fleet Headquarters going over the few adjustments they had found the *Enterprise* needed, then they were free - five days of R & R before the ship was due to leave on her first extended mission since being refitted.

So they had gone home - home to that place that Kirk had so lovingly rebuilt, and in which he had spent so many lonely hours. It lay nestled in the hills high above San Francisco, isolated from its neighbors, a quiet sanctuary from the hectic pressures of life.

At first Kirk wondered if he had made a mistake coming back. It was one of the few places he had shared with Lori - one of the few important things in his recent life in which Spock had not been involved. At first, he had loved the old house, then he had gradually grown to resent and then hate the entrapment it signified - the permanence. It was rooted to the ground, unable to move, and so was he.

He had been very quiet during the short aircar ride from Fleet Headquarters. But, as they set down on the parking area and got out, Kirk knew he needn't have worried.

"You like it?"

Spock looked at him, affection showing in his brown eyes. "I would have expected nothing less."

Kirk laughed a little. "It was Lori who found it..." His voice died away as he remembered his last sight of Lori, a twisted, dying figure on the transporter platform. It had been over a year since she had shared this house with him - since she had shared his life - but the memory of both was still painful. He glanced up to see Spock looking at him curiously. "Come on, let's go in and I'll show you around."

Spock picked up his suitcase and followed Kirk to the huge oak doors. Again there were no electric guards, no sensor system - just an old fashioned keyhole. As Kirk searched through his pockets for the key, Spock watched him. Occasionally, over the past few weeks Kirk had mentioned Lori - beyond that Spock knew very little. He knew she had been a Vice Admiral on Nogura's staff, but he did not know how she fitted into Kirk's life. They had obviously been close but for some reason it had ended. It worried Spock that something about it was gnawing at Kirk, but if he wanted to tell about it, he would. Spock would not pry. He was in no position to demand an explanation - for all he knew he had caused the pain Kirk was enduring now.

The interior of the house matched the exterior for quiet elegance - hardwood floors covered with tasteful rugs, subdued colours throughout. Spock followed Kirk up the sweeping staircase to the guestroom. He approved of the cream walls and the heavy, rich curtains tied back from the windows. A solid four poster bed dominated the room.

"This is yours, Spock," said Kirk cheerfully. "Bathroom's in there," he said pointing to a closed door, "and I'm down at the end of the hall." He moved to the door, then turned back and looked at Spock, his eyes sober. "I hope you'll be comfortable here."

A slight smile touched Spock's face. "I'm sure I will be, Jim."



Half an hour later they were in the kitchen pondering what they would have for dinner. Spock had discovered modern concessions had been made in the bathrooms and in the kitchen. There would be no slaving over a hot stove here. He mentioned it to Kirk.

Kirk laughed. "You can thank Lori for that. Most of the time she let me have my own way, let me build my dream house, but the kitchen was hers. She said if she had to cook she was going to do it her way - none of this experimenting with old fashioned equipment like stoves and refrigerators. It was ultra modern or nothing. She was a very determined lady..." His voice trailed off and he stood looking into space.

"You must have loved her very much."

Slowly Kirk's eyes refocused and he looked at Spock. "Loved her? No, I don't think I ever really loved her." He turned away. "You'd better program your own meal. Even after all this time, I still don't know what constitutes a balanced diet for a Vulcan."

Confusion reigned in Spock's mind as he got up. He had thought that Kirk had loved Lori, but now her place in his life was more unclear than ever.

It had been a long time since Spock had experienced the comforts afforded by a house and the relaxed atmosphere of friendship. For almost three years he had 'existed' on the high plateaus of Gol and had lived the self denial of an acolyte in Gol. He seiled inwardly as he thought that perhaps a bed of nails would have been more comfortable.

Time passed quietly and they both enjoyed the relaxed pace. It might be months before they could come back here. Or they might never come back. Space exploration was a hazardous occupation at best, but one they had always willingly accepted. Death was something they lived with, but not something they feared.

The day had been very hot, one of those days in early spring that heralded the heat of summer. They had flown into the city to do some last minute shopping and so that Kirk could arrange for Starfleet to assign a caretaker for his house. This was their last day of freedom - tomorrow they would report back to the Enterprise and within the week they would leave Earth far behind.

They had said little on the flight back. Spock showered and changed for dinner, putting on the tunic that Kirk had given him some years earlier. He looked around the room and felt a little sadness at the thought of leaving it. In a few short days he had grown to love this house because Kirk loved it, and because he loved Kirk.

He made his way downstairs and peeked in the kitchen, but it was empty. He wandered across the hall and quietly entered Kirk's study - his sanctuary as he called it. It was this room he had left for last when he had shown Spock around. It was here that he kept those things which were most important to him - his medals, his books, his tapes, and the beautifully detailed miniature clipper ship that Spock had given him - with 'Enterprise' carved proudly on its side. A huge fireplace with a massive carved mantle dominated one wall of the room, and it was bordered by bookshelves full of manuscripts from all over the galaxy.

Kirk was there, sitting in front of the fireplace. He hadn't yet changed from their trip to town, but had kicked off his shoes and shirt, and was sitting with one bare foot up on the footstool, apparently lost in thought. Spock hesitated, not wanting to disturb him.

"Come in, Spock." The hazel eyes were on him, the gaze solemn and thoughtful.

Spock moved forward a few steps, then stopped. "Is there anything wrong, Jim?"

Kirk's eyes didn't leave his face. "Wrong? Like what?"

Spock felt a little foolish. "Well, you appeared to be a bit distracted earlier, now..."

"Now," said Kirk looking down at his hands, "now I am trying to say goodbye to a memory, and finding it difficult."

"Admiral Ciani?"

Kirk nodded. "Admiral Ciani." His eyes flicked back to Spock. "Why did you leave?"

It had come at last. Spock knew that one day it would and he knew he had to be honest. "Because I was afraid."

"Of what?" Kirk's voice held genuine surprise.

"Of you."

"Me?" For a moment Kirk hesitated, then he slowly nodded. "Of me, of course..."

Spock walked forward and stopped by Kirk's chair. "I discovered I loved you, and I ran. I desperately tried to burn that emotion out on the hot plains of Gol."

"And did you?"

"No," said Spock softly as he knelt in front of Kirk. "Love is forever. One cannot run from oneself."

"Run from oneself," echoed Kirk quietly. "I guess I tried to do that too, in my own way. I ran to Lori. And, for a time, I thought I had succeeded."

"So did I."

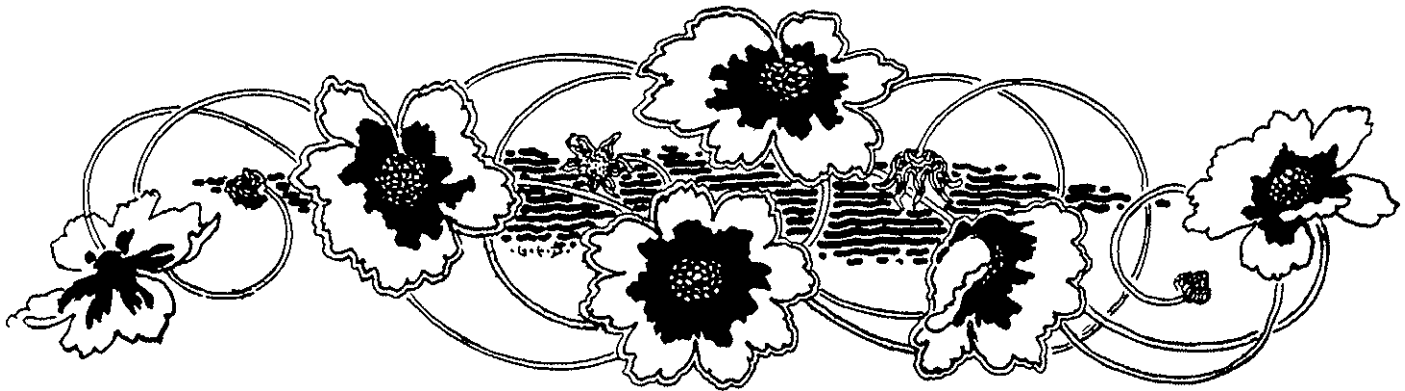
Kirk looked at him. "Gradually I realized I had lost everything that had given meaning to my life..." Spock ached at the pain evident in Kirk's eyes. "...my ship, my crew... Then even Lori was gone and there was nothing left - only this empty house."

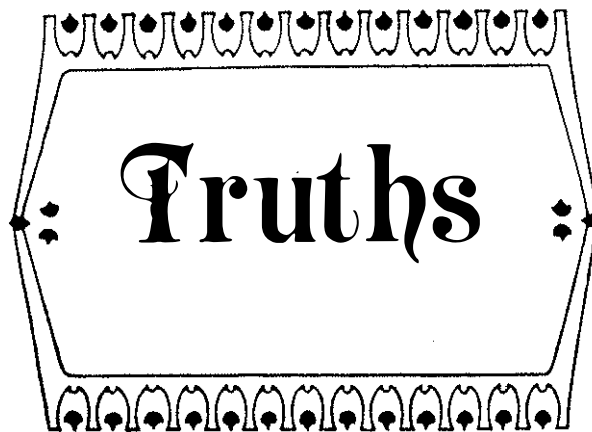
"The house is no longer empty," said Spock quietly.

"No," agreed Kirk with a tiny smile, "and it never will be again."

Slowly Spock held out his hand. "Friends?"

The smile left Kirk's face. He found himself holding the arms of his chair, his eyes locked with those of the Vulcan. Spock had just uttered the one word he had desperately wanted to hear for three years. Suddenly, Lori vanished from his life as though she had never existed. Now it only needed him to move his hand and the terrible hurt would be healed - forever.





Did you hear?

Yes.

We must remain true to what was written or destruction will ultimately be ours.

Not necessarily. These may be different.

Have they ever been before?

No.

Then wait. My words will prove true.

We shall see.

"For crying out loud, Jim, must we go so blasted fast?"

Kirk glanced at McCoy in amusement. "Doctor, I do believe you are becoming a permanent fixture on the guard rail."

"Well, how was I supposed to know you were about to check out maneuvering controls at high warp...?" He broke off as the *Enterprise* swooped in a 180 degree turn and accelerated into emergency warp. After making sure his stomach was still where it should be, he glared at Kirk again, but the Captain had his attention on Sulu and DiFalco as they worked in unison to keep the big ship under control as the stress factors mounted. It was not only the *Enterprise* that was being tested.

Gradually the big ship slowed to sublight speed while Kirk contacted engineering and ordered all engines shut down. He released the lap restraints and got up. He had yet to get used to the feeling of being pinned, although he had to admit it was better than continually being flung around the bridge.

"Well done, Mister Sulu, Chief DiFalco," he said quietly. "I'd like your reports and comments on this test turned in as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir," said Sulu promptly, his mind still on shutting down the engine controls.

"Aye, sir," echoed DiFalco as she shyly looked up at him. Kirk smiled reassuringly at her. He was daily becoming more impressed with DiFalco's capabilities and knew she had been very surprised when he had recommended that she be assigned as the ship's permanent navigator. But her calm reactions during the V'ger incident and the quality of her work since then, along with high recommendations from Sulu who would have to work most closely with her, had convinced Kirk that he had found the person he wanted to remain there.

A loud exclamation from behind him and the thud of a falling body caused Kirk to whirl around. McCoy was still kneeling by the guard rail and it was obvious that Spock had not noticed him as he had swung out of his chair and started to move away from the science station. The Vulcan was now lying face down on the floor and Kirk swore he was counting to ten in slow, emphatic Vulcan.

To their credit, no one on the bridge laughed out loud, although McCoy's face was much redder than usual. Kirk took a second to compose himself, then he went to Spock's aid.

"Are you all right, Mister Spock?" he asked quietly as he helped him up.

"Quite all right, Captain," replied Spock in the same solemn tone.

"Well, I'm glad you are," grumbled McCoy as he got to his feet. "I think my leg is broken!"

"Doctor, if you would cease to drape yourself around various structures, you would not run the risk of being stepped on," said Spock, his brown eyes absolutely devoid of any emotion so McCoy couldn't tell if he was mad or amused.

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry, Spock," he said grudgingly.

"Apology accepted," said Spock blandly, knowing full well that McCoy had expected him to say something else.

"If you gentlemen are finished," said Kirk quickly before open battle began, "I would appreciate you accompanying me to engineering, Mister Spock." He turned back to the open bridge. "Mister Sulu, you have the con." He started for the turbolift. "Bones," he said quietly, "you'd better get that leg checked. I don't want a crippled Chief Medical Officer." He grinned, then disappeared into the turbolift, Spock hot on his heels.

McCoy muttered something inaudible and limped into the other turbolift. As the doors shut behind him, Sulu and DiFalco burst into laughter, quickly followed by the rest of the bridge crew. Uhura held her aching sides, wondering how she had ever managed to hold her laughter as long as she had.

"Goodness," giggled DiFalco, "does that sort of thing go on all the time?"

Sulu nodded, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. "Mister Spock and Doctor McCoy don't exactly see eye to eye on a lot of things, but it's not usually quite this good."

DiFalco shook her head. She was slowly beginning to realize that the 'legends' she had heard so much about were really only men - and fallible at that. Still chuckling, she turned her attention to the report that Kirk had requested.



Later that evening as he was making his way to his quarters after his nightly tour of the ship, Kirk paused at McCoy's door. He decided that maybe he had better check to make sure he was all right.

The door slid open as he pressed the buzzer. He walked in, a little surprised to see McCoy lying on the bed with a thick, heat pressure wrap around his elevated leg.

McCoy dropped the book he had been reading on his lap. "Good heavens, Jim, don't tell me that you're starting to tuck in the crew as well as the ship!"

Kirk grinned. "Only when absolutely necessary, Doctor." He looked pointedly at McCoy's elevated leg. "You all right?"

"Would you be if you'd been kicked full force by that clodhopper Spock calls a foot?" He sailed slightly. "Just a bone bruise. My 'doctor' ordered a couple of days of bed rest, worried about the possibility of clotting or some fool thing. We had a devil of an argument about it." He shook his head. "I told you there'd be trouble with Chapel!"

"Why?" asked Kirk innocently. "Because you've finally found someone as stubborn as you are, and who now has the authority to make you toe the line?"

"Don't forget I'm still the C.M.O...."

"Heavens, Bones, I remember, but do you think you can convince her?" He ducked laughing, as the book that had been on McCoy's lap sailed over his head. He turned around and picked it up, glancing at the title as he brought it back to McCoy. "Must be pretty mind boggling stuff," he said as he handed it back.

"Don't belittle it!" retorted McCoy. "Have you ever read any Dorothy Sayers mysteries?"

Kirk shook his head.

McCoy leaned over and grabbed a small volume. "Here, take this. Doctor's orders!" he said hastily as Kirk started to object. "Starship captains need to relax as much as any other person. Besides," he said with a grin, "I guarantee you'll like it."

"Okay," said Kirk, not really convinced. He looked back up at McCoy. "You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, Captain. Oh, a mint julep or some Saurian brandy would be even better, but you can't have everything."

"You're incorrigible, Bones," said Kirk with a chuckle. "I'll stop by in the morning to see you."

Getting back to his own quarters, Kirk tossed the book onto his bed and slowly got undressed. As he pulled down the covers, he thought for the thousandth time that he must remember to get rid of the awful orange spread and get something more to his taste. He opened McCoy's book and got halfway through the first page before he fell asleep.



The intercom whistle broke into his dreamless sleep. Yawning, Kirk rolled over and activated the audio. "Kirk here," he said sleepily, pulling the forgotten book out from under him.

"This is the bridge, Captain," came an unfamiliar voice. "We just received a signal to stand by for new orders."

Kirk glanced at the chronometer. "At this hour?" he asked, the surprise sounding strong in his voice. "All right," he continued, "have the call transferred to me here."

"Aye, sir," came the cheerful reply.

An hour later he was sitting looking at the blank viewscreen. Orders had been received and acknowledged, and it was starting again. When the ship had tackled V'ger, it had been like a tension-filled dream, so much had happened so fast - the doubts, the in-fighting, everyone suddenly returning. But now things were as they had been before and they had just received orders for their first mission. Like almost every assignment that came their way, it was fraught with danger and unknowns.

He looked at the chronometer. It was still two hours until the beginning of duty shift. He knew he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. He needed to talk to someone about this, he needed to talk to the man who would be asked to share the dangers of the unknown. He needed to talk to Spock. He pushed the intercom and waited for the Vulcan to answer, wondering if he would be any more alert than Kirk had been when he had answered the call from the bridge some hours earlier.

The intercom was answered instantly and Spock's deep voice held no hint of sleepiness.

"It's your Captain, Mister Spock. I'm sorry to call you at such an unusual hour but I need to see you. Would you mind if I came to your quarters?"

There was a momentary silence, then Spock replied, his suppressed curiosity not totally controlled. "Of course, Captain."

The door to Spock's quarters slid open when Kirk pushed the buzzer. He walked into the one place he had not entered since the day that Spock had told him he was leaving Starfleet - and him. He couldn't help but look around. Like his own it had been enlarged and modernized but, unlike the still stark rooms that Kirk had not yet had time to make his own, Spock's quarters reflected his inner self.

Kirk instantly recognized many of the objects - the veiled wall coverings, the ancient warrior artifacts and the firepot flickering its light up the red walls. The narrow bed was gone. In its place was the larger, more comfortable model found in all senior officer's quarters. The Starfleet issue orange cover had been replaced by a beautifully woven spread with Spock's family crest embroidered on it.

For a long time Kirk stood staring at it, then he looked at Spock who was standing on the far side of the room. Kirk had had the spread specially made for Spock to commemorate the end of their first five year mission together. He had come to these same quarters with the package in his hand on that terrible day. He had stood dumbfounded as Spock had coldly informed him that he was leaving. There had been no explanation - nothing. Kirk remembered the hurt - and the anger. He had finally put the package down on Spock's desk and walked out. He never knew if Spock had even opened it. He had not spoken to him again.

Now he had his answer. Spock slowly walked forward. "You could not have given me anything I would treasure more."

Kirk had to swallow hard before he would trust his voice. "I had assumed you would not have found any use for it."

"It was one of the few things I took to Gol. At first it helped to remind me who I was and the reasons for which I was there." His eyes went to the spread and its intricately woven design. "In the end it showed why my reasons were wrong. It is a part of you, as I am." His dark eyes moved back to Kirk. "You said you wished to see me."

Kirk had to drag his mind away from the words Spock had just spoken. "Uh, yes. We've just received new orders. The Vega colonies are having increasing problems with a plant bacterium. Apparently Triosis is the only substance that seems to successfully check its spread and Lacton is the closest planet that has a substantial supply of Triosis." He took a tape from his pocket. "I'd like you to look at this and hear your comments."

Kirk sat silent, perched on the edge of Spock's bed while the Vulcan scanned the tape.

"It seems a shame to intrude," said Spock finally as he turned off the viewscreen.

Kirk nodded. "I know. It's Shangri-la all over again."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Shangri-la, Captain?"

"A mythical place that was supposedly located on Earth, hidden high in the mountains of Tibet. It was a place of love and peace - total tranquility. One would never grow old there..." His voice trailed off as he remembered the stories he had read about it.

"That does not exactly describe Lacton, Jim," said Spock with a slight smile.

Kirk grinned. "No, I know. But the mountains are there, and the people apparently of the same calibre, simple peasants..."

"With established ruling systems and probably all the headaches that go with them."

"You are destroying my fantasy," said Kirk with a laugh.

Spock's tiny smile threatened to deepen. "Just trying to keep you in touch with reality, Captain," he said, unable to keep the teasing tone out of his voice.

"Lacton is within spitting distance of the Romulan Empire, Spock. Unfortunately, reality is something that will be impossible to forget." He slid off the bed and started pacing. "There is no evidence that the Romulans have any influence over the planet's inhabitants. It's odd, though, being that close you would think there would be something..."

"Agreed," said Spock. "It does seem odd that they have apparently left Lacton alone. It would be a perfect situation in which to take command - a simple, peasant people, rather low on the Richter scale of culture."

"Well, whatever the reason, we have our orders. We make first contact and give our usual pitch of peace and brotherhood."

Spock's eyebrows rose slightly. "That statement contains a certain cynical tone," he said mildly.

For a moment Kirk looked a little abashed, then he shook his head. "Sorry, I guess it did. I suppose I saw more than I wanted to over the past couple of years. The ideals I hold..." He paused for a moment. "The ones I held," he continued softly, "are not those found at Command Headquarters." He looked at Spock. "How can I sell something that I know doesn't exist?"

Spock suddenly realized why Kirk had wanted to talk to him now, and not wait for their duty shift to start. He got to his feet and walked over to where Kirk was standing. "Jim, you represent the United Federation of Planets, of which Starfleet is only one small part. You cannot expect a semi-military organization to hold the dreams and ideals of individuals." He paused for a moment, his brown eyes searching the liquid hazel ones of his commanding officer. "You represent the very best of those hopes and ideals. Don't lose what makes you the person you are. Don't let those others turn you against yourself."

Kirk looked at him a little skeptically. "You are talking about a different person," he said flatly.

"Not entirely," said Spock, "or you would not be here now."

Kirk smiled slightly. "Yeah, I suppose you have a point." They stood in silence for a few minutes, then Kirk sighed. "Well, I'd better get going or we're both going to be late for our shifts."

Spock stood motionless looking at the closed door, a hint of worry on his face. Kirk was still struggling with a deep disillusionment born out of his dealings with Starfleet while he was Chief of Operations. As the young, dynamic Captain of the *Enterprise*, he had taken the Federation throughout the galaxy, his cape blowing in a wind of righteousness. That cape had been torn from him in painful strips. Spock suspected a better man had emerged, but that man was still uncertain about his new feelings and how he and they fitted into the rigid structure of the service to which he had devoted his life.

Taking a deep breath, he turned and headed for the shower. Kirk was right about one thing. If they didn't hurry, they were going to be late.

They are coming.

It would appear so.

There will be trouble.

Undoubtedly.

We must stop them.

Did we have to stop the others?

No.

Wait then.

McCoy sensed an increasing tension when Kirk came to visit him and, try as he would, he couldn't get Kirk to talk about it. Finally he contacted Sickbay and ordered some discreet monitoring, confirming his suspicion that Kirk's stress level was high. Unable to pin Kirk down, McCoy turned to the one person to whom Kirk might have revealed his anxieties.

Spock immediately saw the note on the desk as he walked into his quarters. He read it slowly, then stood in silence for a few minutes, a little reluctant to act on it but knowing that he had no choice. He reached for the intercom.

McCoy was waiting for him, his leg still heavily wrapped and elevated. He put down his book as the buzzer rang and watched as Spock quietly entered.

"I gather you wish to speak with me, Doctor," he said, his face and voice totally devoid of expression.

"I appreciate you coming. Please sit down."

"If you don't mind, I would prefer to stand."

Spock's cold demeanor irritated McCoy but he held his temper, knowing that Spock was finding this as uncomfortable as he was. "Spock, I need an evaluation from you. Something is bothering Jim and I can't get him to tell me

what. I've had a few tests run on him and his stress level is high..."

If it was possible, Spock's face grew even colder as McCoy spoke.

McCoy looked down at his book for a moment, then he looked back up at Spock. "I am considering a full physical..."

Spock looked at him sharply. "The Captain is due to beam down to Lacton tomorrow. If you order a physical it will force him to substitute someone else."

McCoy nodded but said nothing.

"This is too sensitive a mission, Doctor. The Captain is possibly the only man qualified to --"

"Bullfeathers," snorted McCoy. "Nobody is unexpendable. However, if you can tell me what's bugging him, I might change my mind about the physical."

For long moments, Spock remained silent. If Kirk had wanted McCoy to know what was bothering him, he would have told him, yet McCoy was well within his rights to ask what was going on. And he would also be well within his rights to stop Kirk from going on this mission if he felt that Kirk's mental attitude bore closer watching. He was trapped between not wanting to betray Kirk's confidence and knowing it was his duty to answer McCoy.

"Spock, what's wrong? Nothing's happened recently to cause stress and from what Jim has told me about Lacton, there is little reason for concern there, so it had to be something else."

Spock looked down at the floor. "There is an old Terran expression, Doctor. 'We have met the enemy and the enemy is us.' That is Jim's problem."

McCoy waited, but Spock did not say anything else. "That explanation is as clear as mud," he said, thinly veiled sarcasm in his voice.

Spock shifted uncomfortably, then he looked at McCoy. "He feels as though Starfleet has betrayed him. The ideals he once held have been shattered. He has had reason to question the values of an institution he once supported without question. Answers which once were clear are now vague and muddled. In a way he is searching for himself."

McCoy frowned. "I thought he had resolved that," he said quietly, almost to himself. He looked at Spock. "Do you feel this might affect his ability to function as an important Federation representative?"

"Negative."

"Spock, I am asking you to answer as a command rank officer and Executive Officer of the *Enterprise*, not only as Jim's friend."

"The answer is still negative." Spock's eyes held McCoy's. "The Captain is sure of who he is as a man, Doctor. If that was altered then there would be cause for concern."

"I thought that was what we were talking about."

Spock shook his head. "That was the man we both saw when we returned to the *Enterprise*. That man is gone forever."

"Then exactly what are we seeing now?"

"A man who had a vision that fell apart at his feet. A man who discovered the values he held were not the values of those he represented. Now, because of this mission he has suddenly been forced to make a decision sooner than he expected - remain true to himself or bend to the values of others. It is a difficult decision, Doctor. Jim has lived with disillusionment for almost three years. It is going to take him a little while to resolve his feelings."

"Can he do it while treading the thin line down on that planet?"

"You know he can."

McCoy nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess you're right. But keep a close eye on him, would you? He's wound pretty tight; I don't want him to blow apart. I wish I could go with you but this blasted leg is going to take a few more days to heal." He looked at Spock. "Take care of him."

"I shall do that, Doctor. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. The next time you swing out of your chair on the bridge, will you please watch where you're going!" He chuckled at Spock's offended expression. "Go on, get out of here and get to bed. You've got a big day ahead of you."

They entered orbit around Lacton with no problem and constant scanning turned up no sign of Romulans. The ship was on yellow alert and the crew stood at battle readiness. The Romulans were still apt to fight first and ask questions later. A Federation starship this close to their territory would be enough to make any Romulan commander trigger happy.

"Got what you need, Spock?" came Kirk's quiet voice.

Spock looked up from the science station. "I believe so, Captain. It appears the information is correct - the

inhabitants are indeed mountain dwellers. There are many scattered, populated areas, starting at a four thousand foot elevation and continuing in varying sizes at higher elevations."

"Well, if nothing else, the view should be spectacular." He looked at Spock. "It's fortunate we are arriving during the warm season in their climate. I would hate to see those ears of yours frostbitten."

For a moment Spock looked insulted, then he realized that Kirk was teasing him. "It is a simple matter to send additional body heat to the extremities when it becomes necessary," he said, warding off any further comments about his ears. "Did you see Doctor McCoy?"

Kirk frowned slightly as he nodded. "He wasn't overjoyed that you told me about his snooping, but I think I managed to convince him that I wasn't about to do anything silly."

"Have you convinced yourself?"

Spock had not really expected Kirk to answer, but he was concerned when Kirk refused to meet his gaze. Kirk turned away and went to the command chair. He made a last check with the department heads, then headed for the turbolift. "You have the con, Mister Sulu. Ready, Spock?"

Spock got to his feet. *I am ready*, he thought to himself. *I only hope you are.*



Kirk and Spock beamed down in a quiet section at the edge of the largest town located at an elevation of ten thousand feet. Kirk had elected to wear the standard Starfleet uniforms instead of the more usual coveralls and brown jackets. He reasoned that they wouldn't be doing much exploring, at least not in the physical sense. Kirk still wasn't altogether sure he liked these uniforms. He had become rather fond of his old gold shirt, and he knew he liked Spock better in the old blue of the Science Department. *Hey, dummy*, he chided himself, *stop daydreaming.*

He glanced at Spock who appeared to be as enthralled as he was. "Quite a sight isn't it?"

Spock obviously had to tear his eyes away from the beauty in front of him. "Indeed, Captain, it is spectacular. It reminds me of tapes I have reviewed of similar places in Bavaria and the Swiss Alps on your Earth."

"I know, I was thinking the same thing. It's hard to believe they could be so alike. Well, I guess we shouldn't just stand here gawking. Come on, let's see if we can find someone to talk to." He contacted Scotty to apologize for not reporting their safe arrival immediately, then he and Spock headed for the heart of the town.

They made their way to what appeared to be a market place, a large square surrounded by small buildings with intricate carvings around the doorways and windows. They were the recipients of many curious stares, but people hurried by them, none making any effort to stop and talk.

"They do not appear to trust strangers," said Kirk thoughtfully. "That could mean there have been strangers here before who haven't left the best of impressions." He glanced at Spock. "It would seem to me that Romulans would quite likely leave that feeling..."

"And I could well be a Romulan," Spock finished for him.

"And you could be a Romulan," Kirk agreed quietly. "Why didn't anyone come up with that interesting thought during one of the briefings?"

"Unknown, Captain, but the thought never occurred to me until now."

"Well, we'll just have to be extra charming," said Kirk with a smile. He looked around. "These new translator implants are supposed to be foolproof. Guess it's about time to see if they really work." He walked over to a group of men who were nervously watching them. "Excuse me, could you please tell me where I could speak to somebody in authority?"

The men cringed back as though Kirk had threatened to strike them. They were all dressed in very colourful shirts and vests over black pants, with heavy boots suitable for the mountainous terrain.

Kirk held his hands out, palms upward, in a peace gesture. "I am not going to harm you. My friend and I just wish to talk to..."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

Kirk turned to see an elderly man approaching rapidly. He was dressed in the same colourful attire as the others, but he did not appear to be stricken by the same fear.

"I am Magas," he said by way of introduction, his small, dark eyes darting from Kirk to Spock, then back again.

"I am Captain James T. Kirk. This is my Vulcan Science Officer, Commander Spock."

"You are military?" Magas asked, his eyes going to their uniforms, to the stripes of their respective ranks.

"In a way, yes," said Kirk. "Is there somewhere that we could talk, someone in authority we could talk with?"

Again Magas looked from one to the other, then he nodded. "Come, this way." Abruptly he turned and scuttled off, causing Kirk and Spock to have to hurry after him.

"Was he speaking Standard, Spock, or for that matter, was I? Either this translator works better than I thought it would, or it doesn't work at all."

"He did not speak Standard, Captain, nor any language I am familiar with. I was able to shut out the translator for a short while and when I did, I could not understand his words, or yours."

"The gift of tongues," said Kirk quietly.

"Not precisely," said Spock. "With the gift of tongues one speaks in his own language. It is the listener who hears the difference."

"Like the Melkots?"

"Close," said Spock, "except that was telepathy."

Magas stopped at the entrance to one of the buildings. He opened the door and ushered them in. Here there was more intricate carving along the hallways and on much of the woodwork.

"I've seen this sort of thing in museums on Earth," said Kirk as he looked around. "One had a large display on antique music boxes. Some of them remind me of this sort of architecture."

Magas led them into a small room filled with beautifully carved furniture and a spectacular view of the mountains out of the curtained windows. "If you will wait here," he said with a smile, then he was gone.

Kirk watched him leave, then walked across the room and sat down. "Well, I guess we managed our initial contact."

"Indeed," replied Spock. He moved over to the window and looked out.

"I wonder who this Magas is?" continued Kirk. "It would seem as though he had been sent to bring us here, but where is here, and who sent him?"

"I would suspect that we shall learn those answers presently," said Spock as he turned away from the window. He stood looking at Kirk for a moment. "These people are obviously nervous of strangers. It could make our mission here more difficult."

"More difficult, but not impossible," replied Kirk. "After all, we're representing the Federation, not the Romulan Empire."

"So you have resolved your earlier questions?" said Spock, his eyebrow on the rise.

"I never doubted that much," said Kirk defensively.

"Perhaps not," said Spock, "but..." He broke off as the door opened and Magas reappeared.

"Captain," he said with another polite bow. "Our Council of Elders will be meeting in the morning and have agreed to have you appear before them. In the meanwhile, allow me to show you to more comfortable surroundings where you can spend the night."

Kirk started to say that they could just as easily return to the ship and come back at a specified time the next day, then decided against it. The town had a tranquility that he found very appealing, and a view that rivaled any he had ever seen. "Thank you, Magas," he said, returning the bow. "Mister Spock and I accept your gracious offer."

Again Kirk saw Magas' gaze go to Spock as if he expected a different response from the Vulcan but, as he usually did, Spock remained silent. Kirk was the diplomat here - he was merely moral support.

Once again Magas took them at his quick scuttle through the town, past many of the fairy-tale houses, beautifully decorated with intricate carvings. Finally they arrived at a house which stood at the outskirts of the town and Magas ushered them in.

"There are sleeping places up the stairs," he said, pointing up a curved staircase. "Here is where the food is kept. May I suggest making yourselves comfortable? I will return in the morning to escort you to the Council." Before Kirk could reply, Magas bobbed in his funny little bow and had scuttled off.

Shrugging slightly in silent defeat, a slight smile on his face, Kirk glanced at Spock, then activated his communicator to call the ship. Scotty reported that all was well and, as yet there had been no sign of any Romulan ship. "Will you and Mister Spock be beaming up soon?" he asked.

"Negative, Scotty," said Kirk, "we've more or less been told we're staying the night, and I have to admit it looks pretty comfortable. I'll follow our call schedule and let you know when we're ready to beam back aboard. But if you spot any Romulans, get hold of us fast, understood?"

"Aye, sir. Scott out."

Kirk switched off his communicator, then looked at Spock. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Let's go see what this planet has to offer in the way of food."

In what was obviously the kitchen, they found a well-stocked larder containing mainly cheeses, fruit and vegetables along with a small supply of meat and both wine and what appeared to be fresh milk. Spock looked at the food in silence.

"Something bothering you, Mister Spock?"

Spock glanced at Kirk. "I was just wondering if this was normal fare, or if they knew one of us was a

"vegetarian."

"You were 'wondering'?" said Kirk in amusement. "This is normal food in this part of the world."

"This might be normal for this part of the world on Earth, Jim, but we are a long way from there."

For a moment Kirk stood silent. "Why would that run shivers down my spine?" he said finally. He looked around. "This looks real enough. Heck, there's too much data for this to be an illusion. Come on, Spock, stop speculating and start eating."

After a moment's hesitation, Spock followed Kirk's example and made himself a substantial meal. When they had finished and cleaned up, they toured the rest of the house. Upstairs they found a large bedroom overlooking another beautiful panorama of the mountains. From there they watched the sun set in the same spectacular mode that touched everything else they had seen on this planet.

Long after Kirk was asleep, Spock lay awake in the darkness, going over what they had learned and seen on Lacton. But finally weariness overcame him and he, too, slept.

So, they are here.

Yes.

They carry weapons, as does their ship.

They have made no use of them.

Yet.

I do not think they will. These are different.

One is not.

Wait.

The demanding communicator summons brought Kirk out of a deep sleep. Groggily he reached over and picked it up. "Kirk here."

"Mister Scott, Captain. We have just had a signal from Starfleet. A group of freighters has had a run-in with some Romulan ships and in trying to outrun them have become entangled in an ion storm. We're the closest starship..."

"We're always the closest starship," muttered Kirk under his breath. He looked up to see Spock's dark eyes fixed on him.

"We can beam you back aboard, Captain, then get underway," continued Scotty.

"Uh, no, Scotty," said Kirk, struggling to get fully awake. "We made some inroads yesterday. I don't think it would be a good idea to suddenly just disappear." He looked at Spock for a moment. His reception the previous day had not been all that good and for a brief moment Kirk toyed with the idea of sending him back to the ship. Then he sighed, knowing the problems it would present. Spock would refuse to go, and Kirk knew that he needed him at his side. He decided against saying anything about it. "We got a reasonably good welcome, Scotty. I think it's safe for us to stay here. You take the *Enterprise* and see what needs to be done, then come back and pick us up."

"Captain," came Scotty's somewhat worried voice, "is that wise? We don't know much about these people and there's still the Romulans to worry about. We'll be practically abandoning you..."

"You're not abandoning me, Scotty. I've got Mister Spock for company. Besides, orders stated to make contact and complete the mission at any cost. We do what we're told."

"I don't like it," muttered Scotty.

"You have your orders, Mister Scott," said Kirk sharply. "There are lives hanging in the balance. We'll be all right. Contact us as soon as you're back within communicator range."

"Aye, sir," came Scotty's resigned voice. "We'll be as quick as we can. Scott out."

Kirk shut off his communicator and put it down, then rolled over onto his back. "Why is it always us, why always the *Enterprise*? What the hell do all those other ships do?"

"You were Chief of Operations for two and a half years," said Spock mildly. "You should be able to answer that better than most."

For a while Kirk lay silent, then he chuckled. "Yeah, you always turn to the ship you know can get the job done." He looked over at Spock. "In my time at Operations, that wasn't the *Enterprise*."

"I know." The softness of Spock's voice surprised Kirk. Spock smiled slightly. "It is not the ship which is effective, it is the people who are aboard her. It is the one who is in command..."

"So you have said before," said Kirk quietly. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "And once again I am down here instead of up there with her. I have to sit planetbound when I should be in command. I'm a starship captain, not a damned diplomat!"

Spock remained silent. He had been through this many times when circumstances had forced Kirk to be off his

ship in times of potential trouble. He knew it bothered Kirk badly each time it happened and experience had shown him that if he let Kirk rant a little that he usually resolved his feelings soon enough.

Kirk reached out for his clothes. "I'm going for a walk," he said in answer to Spock's unasked question. "I won't be gone long."

Spock silently watched him dress but made no move to stop him. At times like this Kirk had to work out his frustration on his own. He could be there as a vent for Kirk's feelings, but he could not resolve his conflicts. That had to be done by Kirk himself.

After Kirk had left, Spock got up, washed, then dressed. He quietly made his way downstairs, noting absently that the sun was just starting to come up. He decided he would see what they could eat for breakfast. Doubtless Kirk would be hungry when he got back.

Kirk was gone a long time. He took a long walk and after his gloom lifted a bit, became lost in the beauty and peace of the town and its surroundings. He noticed that without Spock at his side, the people did not appear to be scared of him, only mildly curious. And where yesterday they had seen only men, today he saw women and children, all dressed in the same colourful costumes. It was obviously a normal dress of the region.

I'm beginning to feel a bit drab, Kirk thought to himself. *At least the old gold shirt would have fit in a little better.* He laughed at his whimsy, then headed back to the house.

Spock had almost given up on Kirk's returning before the breakfast was either stone cold or burnt black. However, he was finally able to put eggs and sausage in front of him, along with fresh, hot biscuits with melted butter, and rich, new milk. Kirk was delighted and fell to with a vengeance, doing Spock's cooking proud. Spock joined him with a bowl of steaming, hot cereal which he knew Kirk did not like, so had not bothered making any for him.

As they ate, Kirk told Spock what he had seen as he had walked through the town. Spock asked him more about the Shangri-la he had spoken of, and Kirk told him the full story of the mysterious land and its people.

Spock sat silent, listening to the slight wistfulness in Kirk's voice. The dreamer had never left this man. He might be disillusioned by the realities of life, but the appealing romantic was still there. Spock found himself absurdly happy at the thought. James T. Kirk was a very complicated man, at times full of contradictions, definitely changed by the years since Spock had first met him, yet basically the same decent, compelling person that had eventually caused Spock to reach out and admit need.

Kirk finally leaned back with a satisfied groan. "Boy, I'm glad McCoy isn't here. He would have blanched to see all that food disappear."

Spock glanced at Kirk's lean figure. "I do not think you need worry, Jim. You appear to have shed what I believe Humans refer to as 'puppy fat'."

Kirk chuckled. "At my age one does not suffer from 'puppy fat', my friend." He got up and started piling up dishes. "You cooked, I wash."

Spock leaned back in his chair and watched Kirk as he worked. It amused him to see Kirk in situations like this, so out of character from the starship commander he knew. With his sleeves pushed up and an apron tied around his waist, he looked more like a kid doing his chores, just as he probably had when he was a farmboy back in Iowa.

Kirk was just finishing when Magas appeared in the doorway. For a minute he stood unnoticed by either of the Federation men, his sharp eyes taking in the peaceful scene, sensing the easy camaraderie that flowed between the two of them. Kirk was just starting to untie his apron when he noticed Magas standing there.

Magas noticed the instant communication to Spock with no word passing between them. He was also aware that the warmth that had been emanating from the Vulcan was instantly suppressed and only the cool exterior that he had shown the day before was left. For a brief second Magas' eyes flicked from one man to the other, then he gave his quick bow. "Good morning," he said with a smile. "I trust I have not interrupted anything."

Kirk glanced down at the apron in his hands, then grinned. "No," he said, "we were just exchanging chores. A long term agreement - whoever cooks doesn't have to wash the dishes."

Magas glanced at Spock, noting that the same good humour Kirk was exhibiting did not seem to be present in the Vulcan. Then he looked back at Kirk. "The Council of Elders have gathered, Captain. I have been sent to bring you to them, that is, provided you still wish to talk."

A puzzled expression crossed Kirk's face. "I most certainly do, Magas." He looked over at Spock for a moment, then back. "I hope neither of us has done anything to dispel that notion."

"No, of course not," said Magas quickly. "If you will please follow me...."

Once again Kirk and Spock found themselves hot-footing it through the town on the heels of the scurrying Magas. He took them back to the building where he had first taken them the day before, then up some long, winding stairs to a large open room. There was a long, bench-like structure down one side of the room and five men were sitting

there, all in the colourful dress that Kirk and Spock had seen on the other men outside.

Magas bowed to the others. "This is Captain James T. Kirk," he said quietly. Kirk bowed slightly but there was no movement from the others. All eyes were on Spock. Magas sailed apologetically at Kirk, then proceeded to introduce Spock just as Kirk had, as a Vulcan Science Officer, rank of Commander. Like Kirk had done, Spock inclined his head respectfully, his hands remaining behind his back.

One by one, Magas introduced the silent men, then turned to Kirk. "The Council of Elders, Captain. Now, what is it we can do for you?"

Kirk glanced at Spock briefly, remembering their conversation of the previous day, knowing that then he had no answer, that he did not know what his true feelings were, nor how truthfully he could represent the Federation. Even now he was still unsure, and he knew Spock knew.

Finally he stepped forward. "Gentlemen, I represent a large group of peoples under one common organization called the United Federation of Planets. It is the wish of the Federation that they become known to you, that their ideas and..."

Spock listened with half an ear to a speech he had heard Kirk give countless times in the past. Kirk's cape might be tattered, but it was still blowing in the wind. The Federation was not perfect, but its representatives were also merely men and no more perfect than that which they represented. Perhaps Kirk finally understood that by showing some degree of fallibility, they showed the Federation not as something that was perfect, but as something that strived to be the best for all its peoples.

Finally Kirk was finished. Magas looked at the silent Council, then turned to Kirk. "You have told us much, Captain, and we would like time to reflect upon it. You are free to move through the town, to go back to the house. I will find you when a decision has been reached."

Kirk hesitated for a moment, then he bowed slightly. "We will be waiting for your decision," he said with a smile. He glanced at Spock who also bowed, then the two of them turned and left.

Magas turned to the Council. "Well?"

"A persuasive presentation," said one.

Magas looked at the others. "Anything else?"

"He did not threaten the use of force."

"Not yet," said another, "but how can we know that it will not happen if we refuse his words?"

"There is no way of knowing..."

"But what if...?"

The debate started in earnest. Magas sat back and listened to all the doubts and fears of simple, honest men who had been hurt once too often through trust, yet men who still wanted to believe.

Kirk and Spock wandered through the town until Kirk noticed that Spock was growing increasingly uncomfortable by the obvious fear he was causing. Wordlessly he steered their course back to the house by skirting the edge of the town, thereby avoiding most of its inhabitants.

Magas was waiting for them in the yard, comfortably sitting in one of the large wooden chairs that was on the grass. His keen eyes noted the unusual direction of their approach.

"You find our cliffs interesting, Captain?" he asked as he rose to his feet. "Not many visitors risk going so close to them." He watched intently for any reaction which Kirk or Spock might show to his words, but there was none.

"We find your whole world interesting, Magas," said Kirk. "I envy you living among all this beauty." The words were genuine and sincere.

"Is your world so sterile, Captain?"

For a moment Kirk stood silent, then he shook his head. "No, sir, not my world..." He hesitated, then looked up at the mountains and finally his eyes fell on Spock. A warm smile lit his eyes, turning them a burnished gold. "Not any longer," he said almost to himself. Again, for a brief instant, Magas felt an emotional response from the Vulcan, as if this Human at his side ruled his emotions as well as possibly his life and his destiny. "But we are getting off the subject..." Kirk's voice broke into Magas' speculation. "Has the Council decided?"

Magas nodded. "Yes, in a way. They have decided they cannot decide. What your words offer they feel they have no authority to either accept or reject. Therefore they have asked that you be presented to the Bruisers."

"The Bruisers?" echoed Kirk.

"A higher authority, Captain, more empowered to make decisions."

"When can we meet with them?"

"Oh, it will take a few days," said Magas. "They are up there."

"Up where?" Magas' eyes swung to Spock who had asked one of his rare questions, intrigued by the vague wave of

Magas' hand.

"They are three days travel from here, Commander. They dwell in Lugck, principal town of Lacton."

"How much of up there is there?" asked Kirk. To him the mountain appeared to go straight up, although he assumed there was probably a road of some kind linking the towns together.

"Lugck is at altitude thirteen, Captain Kirk. Crptx, where we are now, is at altitude ten."

Kirk glanced at Spock for help. "I would assume, Captain, it would mean thirteen thousand foot elevation since our sensors registered this particular location at ten thousand."

Kirk frowned a little. "The air's apt to start getting a bit thin for the more delicate species up there."

Spock barely suppressed a smile at Kirk's statement. Delicate hardly described Kirk even though Spock was constantly jolted by the frailty of the Human species.

"We will leave at noon tomorrow, Captain," said Magas. "There are places to rest on the way. Please be sure to say if you start to feel discomfort at any time during the travel."

"Rest assured that I shall, Magas," said Kirk with a polite bow. "Until tomorrow?"

Magas bowed and scuttled off, leaving Spock silently denying what Kirk had said. He might crawl on his hands and knees, but he would never admit 'discomfort'.

"Come on, Spock," said Kirk, poking him in the ribs. "Let's take a break, then I'll cook dinner. You can wash up this time. I'm hanged if I'm getting caught in an apron twice in one day!"



They made the journey in easy stages. When Kirk first discovered that they were going to be going on foot, he had a sinking vision of the two of them trying to keep up with Magas' unbelievably fast scuttle, but the man kept his stride steady and they had no trouble keeping pace.

Each night they stayed at a comfortable wayside inn. Magas noted how Kirk always acted as a buffer for Spock, seemingly protecting the Vulcan from the Lactons' bigotry more than from their fear of the pointed-eared stranger. Although they never spoke of them, Kirk and Spock appeared to be familiar with the outsiders who had caused this fear, and Kirk went out of his way to attempt to explain Spock's differences.

Unobtrusively Magas kept an eye on Kirk, making sure that he was not being affected by the altitude. He was not sure how he would be able to tell if Kirk was feeling unwell and was hesitant about inquiring. But as they made their way up the steep road carved out of the mountainside, Kirk appeared to be feeling no ill effects.

After three days of travel, the narrow mountain road widened out to reveal another fairy tale village built in a circular fashion in a natural hollow in the mountainside. The strong sun glinted off the many windows. People moved briskly back and forth, intent on their business. As in the larger town below, these people were wearing the colorful dress of the region.

Kirk stood enthralled at the scene with the many majestic mountains clustered in the background. But Spock's sharp eyes caught sight of the forbidding stone building set high over the village, many of its tiny windows barred against the beauty of its surroundings.

"Captain," he said quietly, pointing at his find.

Kirk tore his gaze from the picture postcard village and followed Spock's gesture. For a minute he stood there, his eyes narrowing against the unstated menace of the place. Finally he turned to Magas. "What is that?" he asked.

"A place, Captain, like any other. Come, it is growing late and I am sure you are tired and hungry. I will show you where you will be staying, where you can eat and refresh yourselves." After a last, long glance at the prison-like structure, Kirk and Spock followed him.



"Jarawl!" The man came running forward and watched as Kirk and Spock walked by. He glanced at Secor, who nodded. "The Genrat will want to know there are strangers here. You have permission to leave your station." Quickly Jarawl saluted and disappeared down one of the narrow streets.



Once again Magas took them to a comfortable house, well-stocked with food and again having a spectacular view of the neighboring mountains.

"I will go and tell the Bruiter that you are here," said Magas. "Please make yourselves comfortable. It is late and you have covered quite a distance." His bright eyes fell on Kirk again, trying to assess his condition. "I am sure that the Bruiter will meet with you tomorrow. Until then..." With a bobbing bow, he was gone.

Wearily Kirk made his way across to a comfortable-looking chair and flopped down. Now that Magas was gone, he could let himself go. He glanced up at Spock who was still standing just inside the door. "You've got an advantage," he said with a weary grin. "You grew up on Vulcan. Iowa is hardly above sea level." He ran his hand

across his face. "I'm glad this place wasn't another day's travel from here." Instinctively he tried his communicator but there was no response. Wherever the *Enterprise* had gone, she obviously had not yet returned.

"I will make us something to eat, Jim, then you must get to bed," said Spock quietly. "Tomorrow may be a long day and you should be rested."

"You'll find no arguments on that score," said Kirk, wearily leaning his head against the back of the chair, "but I think I could sleep forever and forget about the food."

"You eat first," said Spock firmly.

Kirk grinned at his tone and disapproving look. "Yes, Mommy," he said. But when Spock returned with some thick, steaming soup, Kirk was sound asleep in the chair. Smiling with fond exasperation, Spock woke him and gave him the mug.

Sitting in the evening's fading light, his eyes heavy with sleep, Kirk reminded Spock of a small child who had been allowed to stay up past his regular bedtime and was valiantly trying to stay awake. Finally Spock took the half-finished soup from Kirk and steered him into the bedroom. There he helped Kirk undress, knowing that if he had been left to his own devices he would have fallen on the bed fully clothed and been asleep in seconds. He pulled the covers back and sat Kirk down, then pushed him gently to the mattress. Kirk snuggled down into the pillows as Spock pulled the blankets up over him, and was asleep before they had settled.

For a few minutes Spock stood looking at him, then he quietly made his way back down the stairs to clean up after their meal. He sat in the growing dusk as it filled the house. For the first time since they had arrived on Lacton, he felt a sense of unease, although he was not sure why. Perhaps it had something to do with the ominous-looking building that Magas had seemed reluctant to explain. Maybe it was because the natives' obvious fear of his presence was finally getting to him.

Finally he got up. Worry would get him nowhere and he needed sleep almost as much as Kirk. Silently he made his way to the bedroom. Kirk had not stirred. He was still lying snuggled into the pillows. The pale light of Lacton's twin moons travelled across the bed and fell on Kirk's face, accenting his look of innocent vulnerability that was almost always present when he slept, making Spock's heart ache to protect him forever against all hurts.

You saw?

Yes.

What do you think it means?

I am not sure. He leads him, yet...

Yet he is the more vulnerable.

It does not follow.

No.

We will wait.

Kirk was still asleep when Spock got up the next morning. Carefully Spock checked to make sure that Kirk's sleep was normal, then he quietly washed and dressed and made his way down the stairs. He was surprised to find Magas sitting in the deep chair that Kirk had occupied the previous evening. Before he could say anything, Magas had bounced to his feet.

"Ah, good morning, Commander," he said. "I apologize for coming so early but I was concerned about your Captain and came to inquire after him before I met with the Bruisers. I trust he is well?"

Spock was once more aware of Magas' intense scrutiny and was beginning to find it a bit tiresome. However, he did not let any of his emotion surface. His feelings were not important here. "Captain Kirk is quite well, Magas, thank you for asking. He is sleeping now. He was rather tired by the sharp climb. He is not used to conditions at this height."

"So I gathered. However, it does not appear to affect you."

Spock shook his head. "I grew up on a very different world. I am used to the thin atmosphere and can easily accommodate - something which he cannot do."

"And this concerns you?"

Spock looked at him sharply. What was Magas after? "No, not really. Provided he does not overexert himself, he should not run into difficulty."

"I am pleased to hear this. Then I shall present your request to appear before the Bruisers, but I think that tomorrow will do as well as today. In that way your Captain will be able to get the rest he needs. Is that satisfactory to you?"

Spock nodded, relieved at being able to let Kirk sleep. "That is most satisfactory, Magas. Thank you for your

understanding."

It was late evening before Kirk made his appearance. He had not bothered dressing but had pulled on a robe he had found which was much too large for him, the sleeves falling down over his hands, the sash dragging along the ground behind him.

"Good morning," he said with a sheepish grin. "How long did I sleep?"

"Twenty-two hours, forty-seven minutes," replied Spock.

"Um, guess I needed it. What happened about the Bruiters?" Spock told him about Magas' early morning visit. When he finished, Kirk looked toward the kitchen. "Is there anything to eat? I'm starving!"

As in the house they had shared in the lower village, the kitchen was well-stocked with a large variety of food. They each fixed what they wanted and took it to the yard outside to watch the magnificent sunset as they ate. They were just finishing when Magas came scuttling along. As Kirk watched him approach, he was once again grateful that Magas had not moved at that pace as they had made their way up to Lugck.

Magas was delighted to see Kirk and after inquiring how he was feeling, he imparted the news that the Bruiters would meet with them the following day. He would arrive about mid-morning, if that was agreeable with them, to take them to the meeting hall. Assured that it was acceptable, Magas scuttled off, politely refusing the offer of dinner.

"Well," said Kirk as he got to his feet, being careful not to step on the dragging edges of his robe, "I, for one, am going to hit the sack again. I'm still feeling a bit pooped." He put up little protest when Spock said he would wash up and was sound asleep when the Vulcan made his way to their shared bedroom.



Kirk resisted the urge to rubberneck at the ornate trappings of the large chambers Magas had taken them to. They had been decorated by an obvious craftsman, the ceiling depicting what could only be scenes of this culture's history. Beautifully stitched handmade tapestries hung along the walls, smaller tapestries bordered the long table where the gold robed Bruiters sat. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Spock had given in and was staring at the ceiling.

As he had done before, Magas introduced Kirk and Spock, then quietly moved to a far corner of the room to watch the proceedings.

Freden, who introduced himself as Grandee of the Bruiters, rose to his feet. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Captain Kirk. Magas has told us of you and..."

"A moment, Freden." The voice came from behind them. Kirk and Spock turned to see a figure dressed completely in black entering.

"Genrat Plas, we are indeed honoured," said Freden quietly.

"I doubt that. Why was I not informed there was to be a meeting?" His cold eyes bored into the silent men.

"Well, I...uh, that is..." Freden looked at the others for support and received none. Kirk and Spock exchanged glances.

"It is of no matter," said Plas. "You may continue." He walked over to a bench and sat down, his eyes raking over the Starfleet officers.

Freden cleared his throat. "We understand from what Magas has said that the Council of Elders in Crptx sent you to us. May I ask what we can do for you?"

Kirk glanced at Spock, then he drew a deep breath and again started what he referred to as his 'pitch'. Standing at Kirk's side, Spock was very aware that Plas' eyes never left him. It was hard to tell if he was listening to Kirk at all. Suddenly he was aware that Kirk had finished talking and everyone, including Kirk, was staring at him. Puzzled, he looked at Kirk.

"Freden just asked you a question," said Kirk quietly, his eyes puzzled and a little worried.

"I apologize, sir," said Spock. "My mind was on other things..."

"Such as battle readiness?" Plas' question was so unexpected that for a moment no one responded.

Then Spock shook his head. "No, sir, I am a Vulcan. My people abhor violence in any form."

"Yet you serve him," challenged Plas, jabbing his arm toward Kirk.

"That is correct," said Spock mildly. "Captain Kirk is my commanding officer."

"And Mister Spock is my friend," broke in Kirk quietly. "His people and mine have been at peace for many more years than any of us has been alive." Kirk's eyes held Plas' with a silent challenge. Instinctively Spock moved closer to Kirk but, to his surprise, Plas remained silent.

Freden looked from one to the other, then cleared his throat again. "We have understood your words, Captain Kirk. You said your Federation would welcome us. Is it the truth that you spoke?"

"Where do you find doubts, sir?" asked Kirk quietly. He was surprised at his own words. In years past he

would never have asked that question.

"You stated your Federation believes that all worlds and peoples had a right to their own lives. We find that difficult to believe."

For a moment Kirk remained silent. Once he had believed that to be true, but in the past couple of years he had seen a lot of manipulation by diplomats. "Freden," he said slowly, "I will be as honest as I can. In every place you find men with ideals and men with their own interests at heart. The Federation contains both but, for the most part, the idealists prevail."

"You say your Federation would welcome us," said Plas coldly. "Is it not more true that perhaps we have something you want?"

Kirk could feel Spock's silent support as he turned to look at Plas. For some reason he couldn't define, he felt open and naked under the astute questioning. He took a deep breath. "Yes, sir, you are correct in your assumption that there is something that the Federation wants. But know this - should Lacton decide against allying itself with the Federation, that wish shall be honoured. What is yours will remain yours." Plas snorted derisively, openly disbelieving.

Freden looked at the others, then turned back to Kirk. "And just what is it your Federation wants that we possess?"

"A substance called Triosis, sir."

Freden looked surprised. "Such a common substance? For that you and your friend have possibly risked your lives!"

"Freden!" Plas' voice cut through the room like a knife.

"Captain..." Once again Magas was hovering at Kirk's elbow. "I believe you have done all you can here. Please come with me." He bowed politely to the Bruisers and turned, totally ignoring Plas. For a moment Kirk hesitated, then he did the same, followed by Spock. Within seconds, they were back out on the street, headed for the small house.

"Magas," asked Kirk as they walked along, "who is Plas?"

"Plas is the Genrat."

Kirk looked at Spock. "Is that translating?"

Spock shook his head. "Negative, Captain."

Kirk turned back to Magas. "Exactly what is a Genrat, and what did Freden mean about us risking our lives?"

They turned into the small yard surrounding the house, then Magas turned to Kirk. "Captain, I must return to the others. Please, make yourselves comfortable. I shall return for you when a decision has been reached." Bowing slightly, he scuttled off.

"That is what I would call a strange reaction, Mister Spock," said Kirk with a frown as he watched Magas quickly disappear down the street. "I'd feel better if the *Enterprise* was in orbit. This Plas character doesn't seem to like you very much."

"I would imagine he sees no difference between Vulcans and Romulans."

"Um, I remember others having that same problem."

For a moment Spock felt his throat tighten as he remembered the bigotry radiating from Lieutenant Stiles those many years ago. But more than that, he remembered Kirk's defense of him in front of everyone else, saying without words that the Vulcan was his friend - the friend that Spock had never before had in his life.

"Spock, are you all right?" Kirk's voice brought him back to the present.

Spock flushed slightly. "Yes," he said abruptly. He looked at Kirk. "Might I suggest you get some more sleep? You still look rather worn out."

"I think old age is creeping up on me," Kirk said ruefully. "There was once a time I could dance up the side of a mountain."

"Not at thirteen thousand feet," said Spock. "One does not move excessively at this altitude unless one were born to it."

"Yeah, well, thanks for the vote of confidence. But I think I'll take your advice and have a nap. I'll make dinner tonight if you wake me up in time." Spock nodded, and Kirk took himself wearily off to bed.

Spock remained out in the yard after Kirk had left. The day was warm and pleasant and he let himself become lost in the beauty of the moment. He did not notice the arrival of Plas and his men. A slight noise caused him to open his eyes, only to find himself surrounded by armed men. He slowly rose to his feet, careful to keep his hands quiet at his sides.

"Where is your Commander?" asked Plas shortly.

"He is upstairs, asleep."

Plas snorted. "A likely story, Romulan."

Spock's eyes darkened. "I am not a Romulan, sir. I am a Vulcan..."

"You expect me to believe that? You are like the others who have come before and you will be dealt with in the same way." He lifted his weapon a little higher. "Hand over your protection." For a moment Spock hesitated, then he took out his phaser and gave it to Plas.

Plas turned to a couple of his men. "Go and get the other one, bring him here." As he saw Spock tense, he touched his weapon lightly and the stunning spark put Spock onto his knees. "That was just a warning," said Plas. He gave Spock a few minutes to recover and then ordered him back onto his feet. When Spock was finally standing again, Plas reached out his hand. "No doubt you have friends who are expecting you to contact them. I want your communicating device."

Spock looked at him, wondering how far he could push. They were on a delicate diplomatic mission and he had to be careful. Starfleet had underlined the importance of success. Briefly he wondered if they would consider it worth their lives.

Kirk's arrival momentarily distracted both of them. He was shoved over to stand beside Spock. "What the hell's going on here?" he demanded, his anger almost wiping the tired lines from his face.

"The Bruisers have made their decision," said Plas quietly.

"More likely you made it for them. You rule by fear, Plas, a most inefficient method."

"That is debatable," said Plas coldly. "Search them," he ordered. "Take any weapons and other devices you find, then bring them."



Kirk lay curled up on the mattress that was lying in the corner of the cell, his hand pressing hard against his aching head. He had no idea how long he had been there - it seemed forever. He had been separated from Spock as soon as they had arrived at the grey rock prison and pushed into this cell.

It was shortly after that that he started feeling sick. His head had been aching on and off for a couple of days before Plas had taken them. It usually started during the night. He had said nothing to Spock about it. Headaches were nothing unusual and if Spock had suspected anything, he had not commented on it.

But now he had more than a headache. Due to the tension of their situation, or whatever the reason, he was finding it very difficult to sleep and would frequently wake up during the night. Now his eyes felt gritty and tired from lack of sleep. Even lying still on the mattress he felt exhausted. He had managed to doze a little but that was all.

A noise disturbed him. Raising his head, he saw a bowl being shoved in under the door. He rolled over with a groan and got up. Retrieving the bowl, he went and sat down on the mattress again. He ate a couple of mouthfuls before his stomach started churning. He put the bowl aside and leaned back against the wall, wondering if he was possibly allergic in some way to what they were feeding him, or if he really was coming down with some sort of bug. A damned inconvenient time to get sick, he thought to himself.

Finally he curled up on the mattress again, his head hurting more than ever. He wondered where Spock was and if he was all right. Plas' obvious hate had been aimed directly at the Vulcan. Kirk knew he should be up and trying to escape, get to Spock somehow. He had tried once to no avail and now he couldn't seem to acquire the energy to get off the mattress. He was worried about Spock and tried to convince himself that Plas would not hurt a Federation representative, but each time he managed to reassure himself, Freden's words about risking their lives would come back to him. His feeling of listless apathy scared him but he seemed unable to do anything about it.



Unlike Kirk, Spock was not enjoying the relative safety of a prison cell. In the 2.7 days Plas had held them, Spock had undergone extensive questioning that was often abusive. He had replied to none of it except to inquire where Kirk was, but his question was never answered. Finally Plas had completely lost his patience and ordered his men to take Spock and complete the standard instructions.

Now, for one of the few times in his life, Spock was experiencing cold fear. He had tried to blank his mind against it, to let his Vulcan control establish serenity, but he had failed badly.

He was finally alone but not altogether sure he was happy about it. His hands were tightly tied and he was hanging from a rope attached to his wrists. He had been lowered back against the rock, his bound hands making it impossible to get hold of the rope. And he dared not move, for before he was left alone the rope from which he was hanging had been cut in half, and the rest of it was gradually unravelling, sending his body centimeter by centimeter down the mountain. It was only a matter of time before the inevitable separation which would drop him to be smashed on the rocks far below.



"The other one is here, Plas."

"Bring him in." Kirk was brought before him, his hands tightly bound in front of him. Plas noted the signs of fatigue, putting it down to strain of imprisonment.

"Good morning, Captain," he said politely.

"Where is Commander Spock?" There was no attempt to hide the barely controlled anger and worry.

"He is no longer a threat to you or to us." Plas got up. "I will give you one chance, Captain. If I give you one of your communicating devices, will you leave Lacton?"

"Not without Spock."

"Kirk, we have had others like your friend here before. It has always been necessary to eliminate them before trouble started..."

"Spock is not like those others! He's a Vulcan, not a Romulan. His race hates violence!" In spite of himself, Kirk had to press his hands against his pounding temple, sudden pain momentarily making him forget the predicament he was in. A few seconds later the pain began to subside. As he brought his hands down, he was suddenly aware of two things: Plas was reaching out towards him, and, on the table behind the Genrat lay two Federation communicators. He didn't take time to think about the consequences of his actions. As Plas reached him, Kirk brought his hands down hard and Plas crumpled to the floor, his fall silenced by Kirk catching him before he hit and gently placing him down. Then he straightened up and grabbed the communicators off the table, but his quick attempt to contact the Enterprise went for naught. He made a fast search but found no sign of their phasers anywhere.

Finally he looked around and stopped short. How on earth was he going to get out of here? There was only one door and he knew that there had to be guards on the other side. During his quick search for the phasers, he had found nothing that would help him cut the rope from his hands. Then he noticed there were no bars on the windows. Silently he ran across the room and looked out. He quickly scanned the jutting rock. It would be a tricky climb, but not impossible. With his hands tied it would be tough going but he had to get free of this place if there was any hope of helping Spock.

He caught hold of the window ledge and swung himself over, carefully lowering himself until his feet managed to find a secure hold. Slowly, painfully, he made his way to the ground. By the time he made it to the road he was gasping for breath and forced to sit down on an outcropping of rock, unable to go any further. Involuntarily he looked back up at the stone fortress. He had no idea how long it would be before he was missed. He should get away now, think of some way of finding Spock, but somehow he couldn't seem to muster the energy to move. It was almost as if something was holding him down. He leaned back against the rock face, his body starting to tremble from the sustained tension and aftermath of his climb. How could he find Spock? How long were they going to be marooned on this accursed planet?

"Captain?"

Kirk's head jerked up in surprise at the sound of Magas' voice. Magas was standing in front of him, his bright eyes taking in Kirk's dirty and dishevelled clothing, his bound hands.

"You escaped from Plas, Captain. Not many do." He looked at Kirk sharply. "Plas still lives?"

"Yes," Kirk said wearily as he pushed himself to his feet. Magas took note of his pale face and trembling body but said nothing as he untied Kirk's hands. "Magas," Kirk continued, "you must tell me what's going on! Where's Spock? What control does Plas have? Who is he?"

"Captain, you do not have much time and it may already be too late for your friend."

Cold fear filled Kirk and his face, if possible, grew more pale. "Magas, you must tell me!"

"Yes, yes, but you must prepare..."

"For what?"

"You must leave, go back to where you came from."

"Magas, I can't. I won't leave without Spock, and the ship that brought us here has had to leave for a few days..."

"You are stranded?"

"Not exactly, but there is no way we can leave until it returns."

"That is very bad, Captain. Plas will surely be after you."

"The Bruisers..."

"Have no power, Captain. They meet those from the outside, listen to their words, but it is the Genrat who makes the decisions."

"The Genrat? What does that mean?"

"Genrat?" For a moment Magas looked puzzled. "Plas is the head of the military. We are a military state, Captain Kirk. They are the ones who make and enforce the laws."

Suddenly the term translated and Kirk was astounded that he hadn't thought of it earlier. Genrat - general, it was so obvious! Why had he missed it? Why had they all missed it in the same way as they had missed the obvious connection between Spock and the Romulans? What was it about this place that was blocking obvious answers?

Magas' urgent voice broke into Kirk's thought. "I will gather everything you will need for your flight, Captain."

"Flight?"

"You cannot stay here or you will surely die. While you go to see if you can aid your friend, I will get what you need. I will meet you on the outskirts of the town."

"You know where Spock is?"



The rope gave a little more. Spock held his breath. A few minutes before he had looked up to see only a few strands still attached. That movement had caused further separation. Now he hung with his eyes tightly shut as he composed himself. It was going to happen. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

He slipped another millimeter. Unconsciously he braced his back against the smooth rock, trying to find any sort of a hold. The movement caused further slipping. He drew a slightly unsteady breath as he felt the last bit of rope steadily unravel and braced himself for the drop.

Which never came. Suddenly there was a firm pressure on the rope and he felt himself start to be pulled steadily upwards. He found he couldn't move, his body was momentarily limp from shock. Strong hands grabbed him under the arms and dragged him away from the edge of the cliff. Suddenly he was surrounded by warmth as his rescuer collapsed onto the ground, his breath coming in shuddering gulps.

For a moment they lay still, then Spock looked at the gasping form of his Captain. "You cut your timing a little fine this time, Jim."

"Sorry," panted Kirk, "I'm a...little...out of practice...running up...mountains. What the...hell did you think you were...doing?"

"I believe I was presumed to be a Romulan," replied Spock slowly, finally bringing his aching arms down from over his head. "It would appear they meet as unpleasant an end as possible."

"I would tend to agree," replied Kirk, having somewhat caught his breath. He quickly untied Spock's hands and gave him his communicator. "Come on, we've got to get out of here."

"Exactly where are we going?"

"I have no idea. Magas is planning some sort of escape for us. I'm afraid that I've managed to get Plas rather annoyed at me. He's not going to be far behind." He turned and started down the mountain, leaving Spock no time to ask any questions. Within a short time they came to the town and Magas was waiting as he had promised he would be.

"I have everything you need," he said quickly. "You have little time. Hurry!"

Kirk looked at the backpacks. "What is this? Where are we going?"

"Up there," said Magas, pointing up at the mountain, its snow-covered top shrouded in clouds. "To safety, up there."

"What is up there?" asked Spock. "A bare mountain holds no protection."

"Please," said Magas, "do not ask questions. To go down the mountain is certain death. The only safety is up." He looked around. "Plas will be looking for you by now. If you delay, he will catch you. Please, go!"

"The man has a point, Spock. Maybe we can find a cave or something and hide out until the Enterprise returns." He lifted one of the packs. "Shall we go?"

Magas noted the concerned way Spock was looking at Kirk. The Human was clearly unwell, even though he was making a good effort to hide the fact. He was very pale and the hands that held the pack were trembling. But, to Magas' surprise, Spock made no comment. It was obvious Kirk did not want to worry Spock and it was just as obvious that Spock was attempting to hide the fact that he knew. Their concern and care for each other was something Magas had never seen expressed before.

With a dubious look on his face, Spock picked up the other pack. When Kirk turned to thank Magas, the man was gone. For a moment he stood silent, then turned to Spock.

"It appears to be a nice day for hiding, Mister Spock. We'd better get started before company arrives." Spock nodded in silent agreement and the two of them started up the mountain.

They are coming.

Have any ever reached us before?

No.

Then why worry?
Because these are...
Different?
Yes.
In what way?
They both told and live their truth.
We will wait.

The Bruisers were sitting in silence when Plas burst into the room. "Where is he?" Freden rose to his feet. "Who are you looking for?" "The stranger we took from you." "He has not been here. We have no knowledge of his whereabouts." "Who would?" "You know without asking." Magas was still standing at the outskirts of the town when Plas and his men finally found him. "You are treading dangerous ground," said Plas in a menacing voice. "Perhaps," said Magas quietly. "Where is he?" "You mean 'where are they'?" "What are you saying, old man?" "They are together again, as they should be." "You have interfered, Magas. It is not allowed." Magas shook his head. "I have done nothing. If you want them badly enough, they are still yours for the taking. But remember what is written..." Plas glared at Magas. "You have sent them up the mountain, haven't you?" "Have I?" "They will die before they reach the top." Magas nodded. "It is possible. No one has survived before." "Because of the protection of my men. We are the superior force - they cannot escape us." "If that is what you wish to believe." Plas turned away in anger. He called to his men and they disappeared back into the town. Magas knew they would shortly be after the two Federation men. He glanced up at the mountain but Kirk and Spock had long since disappeared from sight. "Keep your thoughts upon them," he said softly. "These are not like the others who have come before. They will prove by their actions the truths they live." He turned and made his way back into the town. His job was done. With their ship gone, it was now up to Kirk and Spock whether they lived or died.



Kirk looked over his shoulder. "I would imagine they'll follow us. I only wish I knew how much of a head start we have." "It is pointless to worry about unknowns, Jim. Doubtless they will follow and we must remain alert. But I highly doubt if they are any more fit for this climb than we are, even if they are mountain dwellers. The ones who took me to the cliff face were in worse condition than I am." "I suppose you made it simple for them to take you there, too," said Kirk drily. "I would say so, considering the fact that I did not want to hurt anyone, keeping in mind the intent of our mission here." Kirk snorted. "I think we can safely assume we've blown the mission. Not a very auspicious start after pounding on Nogura's desk and telling him I was the best man for the job." "You are," said Spock quietly. Kirk glanced over at him but didn't answer. He shifted his backpack to a more comfortable position, then looked up. "It's been a while since I've really mountain climbed." His eyes narrowed as he looked at the cloud-shrouded top. "I hope we can find somewhere to hide out before we get too far up. That looks like a pretty stiff haul." Spock's gaze followed his. "Not only that, Captain, but I would estimate those clouds are about fifteen thousand feet. I wonder how much more of the mountain there is above that?" "I wouldn't even hazard a guess," said Kirk. Again he looked behind them but there was no sign of anyone

following. "Well," he said resignedly, "I guess we'd better hot-foot it while we're on ground we can handle."

It was practically dark when they stopped. They had kept going long after Spock had wanted to stop, his worry growing over Kirk's harsh and laboured breathing. Finally they found a place which afforded some shelter and, more important, was defensible. Kirk eased the backpack off his aching shoulders and lowered it onto the ground.

Spock had already opened his and was pulling out the contents. His eyebrows rose at the completeness - a small tent, food, a stove and some combustible material to light it.

"It would appear someone was ready for this," said Kirk, who was sitting on the ground, his back resting against the rocks. He kicked his own pack over with his foot. "Here, you might as well look at mine. I don't have the energy at the moment."

Spock opened Kirk's pack and found two lightweight sleeping bags, some insulated climbing suits and gloves, and two pairs of climbing boots.

"I'm sure they're even the right size," said Kirk drily. "Spock, why do I get the feeling all this was planned?"

Spock looked at him curiously but made no comment. He stood up. "I will gather some wood for a fire," he said.

Kirk glanced down the quickly darkening mountain. "I guess it's safe enough as long as we keep it small. Go ahead, I'll start dinner."

But when Spock got back, Kirk was still sitting, leaning against the rocks, his head resting on his folded arms which were propped up on his raised knees. He took no notice of Spock's return, nor did he reply to Spock's greeting. Casting a worried glance in Kirk's direction, Spock piled the wood in a rock shelter, then busied himself getting the tent set up and the stove going. He searched through the supplies and brought out some soup which was soon bubbling on the hot stove.

As it heated, Spock filled the canteens he had found in the packs from the container of water he had collected, then he built a small fire, enough so they could see each other but built in the shelter of an overhang so it could not be spotted by anyone coming up on them.

"Jim?" Gently Spock shook him. Kirk had not stirred since Spock's return, although the Vulcan was sure he wasn't sleeping. "Jim, the soup is ready."

Finally Kirk looked up. Spock was puzzled by his uncharacteristic apathy. For several seconds he appeared to be disoriented. "Soup?" he said finally.

"Dinner," said Spock firmly. "We have no idea how far we're going to have to climb. You've got to eat to keep up your strength." He held out the mug. Slowly Kirk reached out and took it.

"The wind is picking up," said Spock quietly. "It might be more comfortable to eat this in the tent. I'll put out the fire." He waited to make sure Kirk was going to get up, then he went and buried the fire, making sure no trace was left before he also made his way to the shelter of the tent.

While Spock was concerning himself with the fire, Kirk carefully poured his soup down a small crevice in the rocks. His stomach lurched at the mere thought of eating, but he knew Spock would be upset if he thought there was anything wrong. He was buried deep in his sleeping bag feigning sleep, the empty mug by his side, when Spock finally came into the tent. He fought to keep his breathing deep and even, but even at rest he felt strangely breathless. Try as he would, he found it almost impossible to keep breathing normally.

Spock slipped into his sleeping bag and sat watching Kirk, occasionally taking a swallow of steaming soup. Never once did Kirk stir, never once did his breathing change. Spock knew there was no way he could be asleep; the pattern wasn't normal. *What is he trying to hide?* Spock wondered to himself. *What is wrong? Could something possibly have happened to him at the prison?* Spock knew what he had undergone while he was at the prison and none of it would have led to this type of reaction.

Finally he put his mug down and settled deeper into his bag. He did not plan to sleep, at least not until Kirk did and from all signs, sleep was not about to come to the Human.

By the time Kirk crawled out of his sleeping bag the next morning, Spock was already up and had breakfast ready. Kirk's face was drawn and his eyes red-rimmed and tired, but Spock made no comment. Kirk was still holding it in so Spock pretended not to notice. But he was relieved when he saw Kirk roll up the sleeping bags, then dismantle the tent and pack them. He took the mug Spock handed him. "More soup?"

Spock nodded. "It appears to be the staple," he said non-committally. Then he got up and rummaged through one of the packs, finally getting out the insulated climbing suits. "I think we had better dress properly for this," he said, tossing one across to Kirk. "These uniforms were not designed for mountain climbing."

Kirk forced down the soup, knowing that he had to eat something. Then he quickly shed his Starfleet uniform and put on the climbing suit. Within minutes they were on their way, Kirk finding that the pack was much easier to

carry with the padded suit. Kirk let Spock set the pace and forced himself to keep up, the whole time feeling sick and exhausted, and finding it more and more difficult to catch his breath. But he let Spock stop only when he found it absolutely impossible to keep going.

Finally Spock couldn't stand it any longer and called a halt, troubled by Kirk's pale face and distressed breathing. Kirk made no effort to argue and thankfully slipped off his pack, then sat down on top of it. He would have given anything for some of McCoy's homestyle medicine, or at least a couple of pills that might control his headache and nausea, but all he got was a stick of some kind of high-energy food.

He sat looking at it unenthusiastically while Spock took an experimental bite of his. "Meatless," he reported, "and it has quite a pleasant taste." He made a pointed look at the untouched stick in Kirk's hand.

Slowly Kirk raised it to his mouth, wondering if he would be able to swallow it. As he did so, he glanced down the mountain and stiffened. Instantly Spock was at his side.

"Damn," said Kirk under his breath, "they aren't having any problem tracking us." He reached down for his pack as Spock shrugged into his own. "No more pit stops, I guess."

Spock looked at the distant figures. "I doubt if they are capable of moving any faster than we are."

A momentary heaviness washed through Kirk. "I hope not," he said quietly. "Come on, let's get going."

It was well after dark before Kirk and Spock finally stopped. They had been making little progress, mostly just slipping and falling as they tried to scramble up the ever-steepening rock face. Spock finally caught hold of Kirk's arm.

"Jim, we are tiring ourselves uselessly. I am sure the others have stopped by now."

Kirk reluctantly agreed and they eased off their packs. They were far out of the wooded area so there was no hope of building a fire. Once again Kirk couldn't find the strength or willpower to do anything to help Spock set up their small camp. The Vulcan put up the tent to shelter them from the wind which seemed to have picked up in the late afternoon and became bitter as the sun disappeared. Then he came and got Kirk up and guided him into the tent and into his sleeping bag, leaving his climbing suit on for extra warmth. When he came back into the tent with a mug of hot soup, he found Kirk sitting with his head in his hands.

"Are you all right, Jim?" he asked, finally unable to silently ignore Kirk's obvious suffering.

Kirk looked up. "Yeah, just the usual headache," He said, rubbing his hands over his temples. "How far do you think we've come?" He said nothing about his increasing periods of silent apathy, so Spock did not mention it.

Spock handed Kirk a mug of soup and slipped down into his sleeping bag before answering. "I would estimate we are at an altitude of about fifteen thousand feet." He took a sip of his soup. "It is fortunate that the atmosphere of this planet reaches so high." He took another swallow of soup. "If for some reason we have to go above twenty thousand feet, we will be in trouble. The oxygen thins out about then."

Kirk frowned. "I'm not altogether sure I can go another five thousand feet," he said quietly, almost to himself.

"Especially if you continue to refuse to eat," said Spock equally quietly. Kirk started to protest but Spock held up his hand. "You ate a little soup this morning. What else have you eaten or drunk in the past twenty-four hours?"

Kirk closed his mouth again. Spock had not said straight out that he knew Kirk was sick but he had done everything else but. Kirk looked at his mug for a moment, then took a mouthful and swallowed hard. He lay silent for a moment, then took another sip. This one appeared to go down more easily.

Neither spoke again as they finished their meal, then Spock got out of his sleeping bag and took Kirk's mug. By the time he had cleaned up and made his way back to the tent, Kirk was lying quietly on his side. He took no notice of Spock and once again Spock was fairly sure he wasn't asleep. He quietly got back into his sleeping bag and settled down to wait.

Kirk was curled up in silent misery, his arms wrapped around his queasy stomach. He wished his head would stop pounding, it's persistence over the past couple of days was starting to get him down. He tried to lie still, wishing that sleep would overcome him. But, in spite of being so tired, he never managed more than a few minutes of restless slumber.

Spock lay fully awake listening, as he had the night before, to Kirk's laboured breathing and restless moves. He knew that he would get no sleep that night.

It took three attempts for Spock to get Kirk up the next morning. Kirk was awake but he took absolutely no notice of Spock. Finally Spock almost dragged him out of his sleeping bag. "Come on, Jim, we've got to get ready to move."

Kirk finally responded. He slowly straightened up, then moved slightly away from Spock. He ran his hands over his eyes, then dropped them. "No sign of our friends yet?"

Spock looked down the still-black mountain, then at the faint crack of light that announced the start of the dawn. "Not yet," he replied. "I doubt if they will try to move until the light gets better. They may want us, but I doubt if they want to die while doing it."

"I hope you're right," said Kirk. He slowly made his way to some low rocks and sat down. Spock handed him a mug of soup. For a minute he sat staring at it, then put it down and pressed his hands hard against his temples and rubbed firmly for a few seconds.

"Jim?"

Kirk looked up but the smile that touched his lips did not reach his eyes. "Same damn headache," he said, "only now I've got bellringers in my head as well. Sure wish I had some of McCoy's little red pills." He dropped his hands. "Don't worry, it'll probably clear up once I'm fully awake and on the move." He reached down, but instead of his fingers connecting with the cup, his hand accidentally sent it spinning off into the darkness.

Spock quickly finished his soup and poured more out for Kirk. He stood up and handed the cup to Kirk, then turned and started packing the loose gear into the backpacks. Unobtrusively, he kept an eye on Kirk as he practically gagged the soup down. When Kirk had finished, Spock handed him his pack, making no mention of the fact that he had taken most of the equipment out of it and put it in his own. If Kirk had noticed him doing it, he made no comment.

By mid-morning they had hit the first of the snow, which made their climbing much more difficult. They were both silent as they slogged along, struggling up the slippery rocks, boosting and pulling each other up and over the difficult spots.

Finally Spock left Kirk in a sheltered area and went back to see if the others were closing the distance, but he couldn't see any sign of them. As he neared the place where he had left Kirk, he heard the sounds of someone being violently sick. He broke into a run and skidded into the seal cave where he found Kirk on his hands and knees, his face damp and pale. Spock's arms went around the still heaving body and held him until only dry heaves were shaking Kirk, then he pulled him close.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

Kirk only shook his head, his breathing still laboured. Spock got some water but Kirk turned his head away.

"Jim, you've got to drink something."

Again Kirk shook his head. "Can't." He looked at Spock for a moment, then reached out for his pack. He got to his feet rather shakily and pulled it on.

Spock started to protest, then decided against it. He swung his heavy pack onto his back and followed Kirk out into the ever-deepening snow.

Kirk moved with dogged determination but as the day went on he had to stop more and more frequently as nausea overtook him. Spock started dropping behind him as Kirk increasingly lost his balance, often staggering for some feet before catching himself or, just as often, falling hard.

Finally, thankfully, the daylight faded to the point where they were forced to stop. Kirk sank gratefully into the snow, scarcely noticing when Spock stripped off his pack. He sat silent as Spock busied himself putting up the tent and getting out the sleeping bags.

Finally Spock came over to him. "Everything's ready, Jim." He stood anxiously as Kirk slowly got to his feet but did not reach out to help, knowing that Kirk would want to do it by himself if he could.

Kirk stood for a moment, then closed his eyes and again pressed his hands to his head. To Spock's surprise, Kirk toppled forward into his arms. Quickly Spock caught him. He felt Kirk's startled stiffening and knew the collapse had surprised Kirk as much as it had him. He felt Kirk start to pull away but only tightened his hold.

"Jim, let me help." He got Kirk into the tent and, after brushing the loose snow off his clothing, got him into his sleeping bag. Finally he sat back, open worry on his face. "Jim, what is wrong with you?"

For a few minutes Kirk lay silently, then he finally looked at Spock. "I don't know...feel sick, weak, chest feels tight, can't catch my breath..." He took a deep breath but didn't say anything further.

Spock frowned slightly. He couldn't think of anything he was familiar with that manifested itself with symptoms such as Kirk was exhibiting. It couldn't be the food that had been supplied or surely he, too, would be affected. But whatever it was, it had badly weakened Kirk and for some reason Kirk didn't appear to be putting up his usual fight. Was his lack of resistance caused by the illness, or by something else.

Finally Spock got up and went out to get the stove. As he was heating the soup he heard a dry, wracking cough come from the tent. He looked over, totally at a loss as to what to do.

Kirk took no notice of Spock when he came back with the steaming soup. Spock knelt down beside him. "Jim, you have to eat something. You are going to become dehydrated if you don't take some fluids."

"No, I don't want any."

"Jie, please..."

Kirk rolled over onto his side facing away from Spock, and again the harsh, dry cough shook his body. Spock knelt helplessly beside him. Suddenly the coughing turned to dry heaves. Instinctively Spock reached out and supported Kirk's shaking body until finally he lay limp in the Vulcan's arms.

"Daen," Kirk said weakly. "I'm sorry, Spock."

Spock nodded. "Would you try a little water?"

Kirk nodded wearily. He didn't want any and suspected he would throw it up anyway, but he knew he would have to try. He sipped a little, Spock carefully supporting his head, then, seconds later, his heaving body.

Finally Spock eased him back down. "Maybe you will be more successful after you've had some rest."

Kirk nodded again, trying to give a reassuring smile, and failing miserably. Spock sat drinking his soup as he kept a worried watch over Kirk. Finally the numbing cold forced him into his sleeping bag but he knew he would get no sleep again that night.

Unlike the previous two nights, Kirk fell asleep quite quickly, his exhaustion finally overtaking him. Spock lay in the darkness listening to the steady breathing and wishing for the hundredth time that the *Enterprise* would suddenly be there and he could get Kirk out of this madness, and back to McCoy.

Suddenly Spock froze. Kirk wasn't breathing! For a few seconds he held his own breath, then jack-knifed out of his sleeping bag. Just as he reached Kirk's side, a shuddering breath went through Kirk's body and he started breathing normally again. Spock could feel his own heart pounding as his fear slowly subsided.

It went on all night, ragged periods where Kirk would suddenly stop breathing for impossible seconds, then, just as Spock was about to panic, would once again pick up a regular rhythm. Time and time again Spock debated as to whether he should try to wake Kirk up, but this was the first sleep Kirk had managed in two days and he was loathe to do it. Besides, he was scared enough for both of them. Asleep, Kirk would not know what was happening. Awake might be a different story.

Kirk was worse the next morning. Although his breathing returned to normal when he woke up, his cough was much more evident, leaving him practically breathless and totally helpless at the end of each attack. It took a lot of prodding from Spock to get him up, and when he tried to help fill the packs, his coordination was so bad he was a hindrance.

Tight-lipped, he struggled to pull on his backpack. Spock came up the hill from where he had gone to see how close their pursuers were. Swinging on his own pack, he put an arm around Kirk's waist.

Kirk took a couple of steps forward, then stopped. "I can't."

Spock felt his heart bang for a second. Kirk never gave up even when he was half dead. Why was he behaving so differently from normal? He put more fire in his voice than he felt. "Magas sent us up here, Captain. Eventually we will find shelter..."

"Not dragging me, you won't..." He was doubled over by the wracking cough.

"We go together," said Spock flatly. *But I don't know for how long, he thought. The others are much closer and quickly gaining ground. They must have followed our tracks in the snow until well after dark.*

They had travelled only a couple of hours when the blizzard-like snow started. Spock slid his arm more firmly around Kirk's waist and bent into the howling wind, but even with the noise ringing in his ears he could make out the agony of Kirk's breathing as he strove to catch his breath, gasping for air that did not seem to make it to his lungs. His feet kept moving but Spock was fairly sure that Kirk would no longer be able to stand on his own should he let go.

Finally Spock was forced to halt. He could no longer see in front of him and the whipping wind was making it almost impossible to balance Kirk and himself. Carefully he lowered Kirk into the snow and, as fast as he could with numbed fingers against the howling wind, he got the tent up and the sleeping bags open. He dragged Kirk inside and got him into his sleeping bag, then lit the stove and proceeded to heat a mixture of soup and water.

Even lying still, Kirk was unable to catch his breath. His cough was terrifying in its intensity. When he wasn't coughing, he lay absolutely limp. When Spock came over with a cup full of luke-warm liquid, Kirk tried to push it away and missed completely. He had practically no coordination left. Gently but firmly, Spock took Kirk in his arms and propped him up, then very slowly got the soup mixture down the reluctant Human. Then he continued to sit with Kirk in his arms, his eyes brimming with tears of frustration and helplessness. Kirk was no longer just sick, he could well be dying and there was absolutely nothing Spock could do about it.

They will be taken soon.

Yes.

They love each other.

So it would seem.
They will die.
No doubt.
Must it happen?
Remember what is written.
These are different...

Spock sensed rather than heard the approach of Plas and his men. He had assumed that the blizzard would have forced them to stop, but he had obviously made what could turn out to be a fatal error. He shook Kirk hard but got no response. He didn't know if Kirk was totally apathetic, asleep, or unconscious, but he didn't have time to find out. He scrambled to his feet, swinging Kirk into his arms and ducked out of the tent.

He left everything behind. He did not have the time or the strength to take any of the supplies. He carried only his precious burden to what would probably turn out to be death for both of them.

He could hear the shouts of his pursuers as he ran. He tightened his hold on Kirk's limp body and increased his speed. He had no idea where he was going. The blinding snow and swirling mists of cloud made it impossible to see anything. He slipped and stumbled up the mountainside, wondering in the back of his mind how he was managing to keep on his feet at all. His breath was coming in painful gasps, the bitter cold threatening to sear his heaving chest and lungs, but his strong strides never faltered. He could not let himself be captured. He would not allow them to take Kirk.

He was so exhausted that he barely noticed when the ground levelled out. Suddenly the wind was gone and the snow was falling gently around him. He staggered to a stop, his eyes widening slightly as he looked at the temple-like structure that had suddenly appeared in front of him. It was built into the mountainside, with large arches and pagoda-shaped towers rising towards the heavens. It was impossible to estimate the height since they disappeared into the mist and snow. For a moment he wondered at his lack of surprise, it was almost as if he had known it would be there. Then he mentally shrugged as he remembered Magas' words. *To go down the mountainside is certain death. The only safety is up.* He had obviously deliberately sent them there, but why, and what was this place?

Shangri-la, he heard Kirk's voice say. *This whole place reminds me of what I have read about that mythical land.*

Suddenly shouts came from behind him. He gathered the little strength he had left and ran forward toward the large wooden doors. They parted silently as he reached them, then swung shut behind him as he ran into an open courtyard. He could hear the furious pounding and angry cries of his pursuers on the outside. He staggered to a stop, his strength threatening to give out. He slowly sank to his knees, his tired, desperate hold on Kirk threatening to loosen. He managed to carefully lower the limp Human to the ground before he collapsed completely. He vaguely felt the presence of others as darkness filled his vision. He made one last valiant effort. "My friend..." His voice was a hoarse, painful rasp. "Take care of my friend..." Then he knew nothing.



Kirk woke to find himself gripped in a sudden cold sweat of panic. He wasn't breathing! He couldn't breathe! He jerked up, grabbing at his throat, a silent scream of terror tearing through his mind although no sound left his lips. Suddenly, strong hands were holding him, pushing him back down - strange hands. He struggled against the pressure, too weakened to be able to resist but too scared not to. Finally a rush of air entered his lungs and he doubled over, held in the grip of the violent cough. He gasped for enough air to start each bout, the severity of the coughing shaking his entire body and finally turning to dry heaves.

Eventually he lay still, too weakened from the terror of his waking and the subsequent coughing attack to be able to lift a finger. He continued his gasping struggle for air, his heart racing at an impossible rate and showing no signs of slowing down.

Then the strange hands were back. He could do nothing to resist them, to fight them. He wished there was some light so he could see who it was, so he could see where he was. His shoulders were lifted and he was raised to a sitting position. A cool cloth was run over his face and when he was gently laid back, something soft kept his upper body raised, easing his breathing slightly.

Slowly a dim light flickered in his consciousness and he could make out shadowy figures. He tried to move but again the hands held him. Where was he? The prison? He only had hazy memories of the past few days but there was one thing he remembered clearly - Spock. Where was he? Those were not Spock's hands holding him. Again panic ran through him. Had something happened to Spock? Was he dead?

"Spock!" His cry started him coughing again. Almost doubled over by the severity of the attack, he nonethe-

less kept fighting to get free. He had to find Spock!

Indistinct sounds reached his mind but he could make no sense of them. He fought as long as his weakened body would allow, then blackness rose up to claim him.



Spock was initially aware of being surrounded by warmth and he never wanted to leave the soft security of the place where he lay. He floated in a hazy dream for a few minutes, loathe to admit the reality that was hovering just at the edge of his consciousness. Soft colours swirled in and out and he let himself drift with them. Then two colours started to dominate, growing brighter than the rest, melding and blending with each other, drawing him with them. Hazel and gold, gold and hazel, mingling, intermixed, drawing him, leading him...

"Jim!" Spock was suddenly fully conscious and in one swift movement was out of the bed he had been lying on. The soft light flickering on the walls showed him he was in a small chamber-like room. The light was coming through narrow openings in the rock wall. For a brief moment Spock thought he was back in the prison, but almost instantly the memory of their flight up the mountain returned. They must be in the temple. He remembered running through the archway and into what appeared to be a courtyard, then he remembered nothing.

But none of that was important. He had to find Kirk. What had happened to him? Was he still alive? He vaguely remembered a presence and asking that Kirk be taken care of, but what had happened to him since that time? Desperate questions ran through his mind. Then he noticed the silent, robed figure standing in the corner. The cowed hood of the figure's brown robe obscured the face; the hands were deep within the large sleeves that crossed the figure's chest.

"My friend...?"

Is nearby.

Spock started. The man had obviously not spoken, yet Spock had clearly heard the words. "I must go to him."

You are exhausted and in need of food and sleep.

"Unimportant," said Spock impatiently and with a growing sense of fear. Were they deliberately keeping him from Kirk? And, if so, why? He started to move forward. "Where is he?"

The figure remained motionless for a moment, then turned toward the door which swung silently open. Spock followed quickly and they left the chamber and moved down a corridor, the smooth rock walls periodically broken by the same slits that were present in the room Spock had just left. They appeared to emit both light and heat by a process Spock couldn't even begin to guess at.

The silent figure stopped at another door which again swung open with no sound and with no one touching it. For an instant Spock stood frozen, then pushed forward past the robed figure and practically ran into the room.

Kirk was there, being held down firmly by another robed figure but desperately fighting to get free. Without thinking, Spock shoved the figure away and quickly sat on the bed, gathering Kirk into his arms.

"Hush, Jim," he said softly. "Lie still. I am here now."

For a few seconds Kirk continued struggling, then the familiar strength of Spock's arms made him collapse down against the Vulcan. The terrible wracking cough shook both of them and, to Spock's horror, it was no longer dry. Kirk was coughing a rust-coloured sputum directly from his lungs.

Finally he lay still in Spock's arms, continuing to fight for breath. Kirk's lips were covered with flecks of blood and his face was wet, his hair damply clinging to his forehead. Spock could feel Kirk's heart racing madly under the firm hold of his hands.

Finally Kirk looked up at him. "Spock," he said in a soft, weak voice. "I was so worried..." He coughed a couple of times but managed to hold off another seizure. "I thought you were...that you..." Again he coughed.

Carefully Spock pulled him up so Kirk was leaning against his chest. He hoped it would make Kirk's breathing easier. He could possibly be developing pneumonia. Carefully Spock ran his hand across Kirk's forehead. There was no fever but there had to be some reason why these symptoms were present.

Kirk took hold of Spock's hand as the Vulcan brought it down and held it tightly, as though he was trying to convince himself of the reality of Spock's presence. "Couldn't breathe," he continued. "Wasn't breathing. Can't stop coughing..." Tear-filled hazel eyes held the Vulcan's. "Spock, I'm scared..."

Spock's heart stopped beating for impossible seconds. Never before had he heard Kirk say anything like that. Always there was fight, rejection of impossible circumstances, occasionally almost foolhardy bravery in the midst of often foolish resistance. Now three words changed everything, *Spock, I'm scared...*

"Jim," he said, struggling to keep his shaking voice sounding normal. "You will be all right. The ship will be back soon." He started to get up but Kirk grabbed him hard.

"Don't leave me!"

Spock took his hands. "I will always be at your side, you know that." He carefully helped Kirk to lie down,

noting the dirty climbing suit was showing stains as the sweat of Kirk's fear was starting to soak through the material. He looked at the silent figures by the door.

He would let us do nothing for him. He has been fighting since your arrival.

Spock felt his stomach tighten. Kirk had obviously woken during one of those periods when he wasn't breathing. No wonder he was scared. Spock remembered his own terror during that first bout when he realized Kirk had stopped breathing, but he nodded at the more characteristic action of Kirk's resistance. "He needs to be washed and fed - and some clean bedclothes..."

Things will be brought.

Spock carefully unwrapped Kirk's fingers in order to free his hands, then he looked up again. "My friend is very sick. Do you have a doctor, a healer, who might be able to help?" The silent figures bowed, then left.

For a moment Spock stood looking at Kirk, at the uneven rise and fall of his chest as he struggled for air. Then another violent coughing spell seized him.

"Oh, God," he choked out. "Spock...help...!" Suddenly a knifing pain stabbed through him and he screamed out as terrible cramps gripped him. He couldn't stop coughing and each time he gasped for breath he started choking on the matter and fluid coughed up from his lungs. His body twisted in a desperate, useless effort to escape the incredible pain. Then, mercifully, he lost consciousness.

By then Spock had scooped Kirk up in his arms and had bent him forward. He must not aspirate anything he was coughing up. He felt Kirk go limp in his arms but continued to hold him until Kirk's breathing started to approach something nearing normal control, then he pulled him back. At that instant the door silently opened and a group of silent figures entered, each wearing similar brown robes. They carried hot water, towels, bedclothes, and a couple of robes like the ones they were wearing.

Carefully, Spock eased Kirk back and stood up. He got Kirk out of his climbing suit, frowning at the sweat-soaked figure. Kirk had lost a lot of fluid and Spock knew he had taken in nothing to replace it.

One of the figures moved forward with water and some type of soft soap. Together they cleaned Kirk, then eased him into the soft robe which folded itself like a cocoon around the suffering figure. Spock noted an odd look of peace momentarily cross Kirk's face, then another of the robed figures stepped forward.

He is very sick?

Spock quickly looked up but again he could not see the face. The voice had touched his mind, not his ears. He nodded. "I am afraid he may be dying," he said unable to keep the emotion out of his voice.

What is normal for him?

Again the silent question. Spock looked down at Kirk, at the pale figure swaddled in the robe and soft covers. Even unconscious, he was fighting to breathe, his twitching body fighting pain it was not able to voice. The cowed figure listened as Spock described what Kirk would be like when he was healthy, and how the illness had developed to this point. When he had finished, the figure turned towards the others and they quickly departed, although no spoken word had passed between them. Within minutes they were back and fragrant herb packs were carefully fixed onto Kirk's abdomen and thick, warm salve was rubbed on his chest.

Gradually Kirk lay still, the medications, at least for the moment, relieving some of his agony. Spock carefully raised his shoulders and packed soft rolls of material under him so his upper body was elevated. Then he sank to his knees by the side of the bed, wiping a dirty sleeve across his eyes.

You need rest as well, came the silent words.

Spock shook his head. "Unnecessary," he said without looking up. "I will stay with him." Again the figures looked at each other, then they turned and left, leaving Spock to his silent vigil.

Their love is deep.

Yes.

Will he live?

Unknown. It is a sickness I have never seen.

Their ship is returning.

But possibly not in time.

It might kill the dark one.

I know.

It will be hard to wait.

The pain was everywhere but muted in a way he had never felt before. Every breath threatened to renew the agony but it never quite started. He lay very still, but nothing happened. Finally he opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was Spock. The Vulcan was sitting on the floor beside the bed, still dressed in the climbing suit that Magas had provided. His dark eyes were fixed on Kirk's face. For an instant Kirk read a trace of fear in the brown eyes, then they changed back to their normal inscrutable expression.

Kirk took a breath to speak and the world exploded. The cough and cramps suddenly reached out and he was being torn apart. Once again he couldn't get adequate air to cope with the terrible pain.

He didn't know how long it went on - it seemed forever. Then he felt his body being covered with something thick and sticky, then bound with something soft and the luxurious robe replaced. He slumped back against a gentle hold and knew it had to be Spock.

The long lashes were wet when he finally opened his eyes again, mute testimony to his suffering. He looked around, confusion showing in the liquid hazel eyes as he saw the silent robed figures by the door. He wanted to ask who they were but he was too scared to draw in the necessary breath. He didn't know if he would be able to survive another bout like the last one.

Spock's voice sounded a thousand miles away. "He needs nourishment - some fluids."

Kirk watched as a large jug was brought forward, full of a steaming liquid. He knew he couldn't swallow it. He felt his stomach constrict as the smell hit his nostrils. He couldn't face the prospect of throwing up. He fought Spock with what little strength he had left.

"Jim," said Spock softly, "please relax. Just let some of it trickle down. You will feel better if you can take some fluids. You are dangerously close to being dehydrated."

There was a quiet desperation in Spock's voice, a plea that Kirk couldn't refuse. Finally he lay still and let the Vulcan feed him. He felt himself start to choke, felt the blinding pain and then felt nothing.



It took a long time for Spock to get the cup of fluid down Kirk as the man drifted in and out of consciousness, but he finally managed it. Then he lowered Kirk to the pile of rolled covers and cleaned the traces of blood from his mouth. He took off the top cover where Kirk had been lying twisted in agony, and put on a fresh one. Finally he started to clean the flecks of blood from his own sleeve where Kirk had rested while he had been coughing.

The door swung open and another figure entered. *You are exhausted, came the thought.*

"I cannot leave him," said Spock stubbornly.

He has slipped into the veil of blackness. If you collapse, what help will you be to him? Do not worry, he will not be alone.

Spock stood looking down at Kirk, who was lying unmoving, almost lost in the soft wraps and large robe. His mouth was slightly open and Spock cringed at the harsh sound of his breathing. Finally he looked up. "I will not be gone long?"

No, and if he appears to be waking, you will be brought back immediately.

Reluctantly, Spock moved towards the opening door. He could not fight the logic of the robed figure's argument any longer. He had gone about as far as he could go.

He was led deep down within the mountain, through seemingly endless catacomb-like corridors, past many closed doors. At regular intervals they passed open slits in the rock face which emitted the same heat and flickering light that were present in the chambers.

Finally his curiosity got the best of him. "This place, your source of heat and light so far from the surface..."

Volcanic, came the silent response, suppressed and controlled.

Spock's eyebrows rose. That spoke of an advanced technology. "Who are you?" he finally asked.

People like yourselves.

"You use the plural?"

Yes.

Spock fell silent, puzzled by the answer. They turned the corner and were immediately met by hot pools. There were some large towels and a brown robe neatly folded on a nearby rock shelf.

You may bathe here, came the silent voice. These are for you when you have finished. I shall return when you are ready.

In spite of himself, Spock soaked for luxurious minutes in the steaming water. It swirled around his tired body, soothing the aching pain of body and soul. His muscles tingled from the movement and he realized this was no ordinary water although he could not begin to think of what would cause the reaction he was feeling.

Finally, reluctantly, he got out and dried himself. He picked up his wrist communicator and put it back on. He remembered the relief he had felt when he discovered he still had it. Kirk had lost his somewhere, probably in one of his many falls. He tried reaching the ship again but met only static. Still no *Enterprise*.

He pulled on the gloriously soft brown robe and was instantly enveloped by a feeling of total serenity. He remembered Kirk's expression when the robe had been wrapped around him for the first time. It was obvious even in his unconscious state that he had felt the same thing.

Spock did not know if he was being monitored in any way, but shortly after he had donned the robe, his escort reappeared.

You are ready?

Spock nodded. "How is...?"

Your friend is still quiet, came the thought reassuringly. Come, you must have something to eat.

Again they moved through endless corridors. This time they passed many robed figures, all of whom bowed slightly as Spock and his escort passed.

Eventually they entered a huge, open chamber where many of the robed figures were gathered. Spock could only guess at its size. It would have to stretch to the top of the mountain, however high that was. In the very center of the rock floor was a deep pit, and a bright ruby glow emanated from it - obviously the heart of the volcano. At intervals around the walls stood figures of tremendous height that had been sculpted out of the rock. Around each figure, the wall rock had been intricately carved in scenes and symbols. There was thick smoke rising from burning incense in front of a few of them.

Spock stood in silent awe of the craftsmanship which had designed the huge vault. Then a light touch on his sleeve caused him to follow his guide around to a circular stairway which ran around the circumference of the chamber. They mounted steadily higher until they came to a flat, projecting area. Spock stopped and looked down. The brown robed figures were tiny from that height, but the tops of the carved images were just below where he stood.

Then he noticed the floor of the chamber. Deep fissures led outward from the large volcanic opening, and Spock knew that they had to have been carved by the same craftsmen who had done the rest of the chamber. The deep lines ran in intricate patterns through the grey/white stone floor and the deep red of the volcano's fires glowed from below.

The light touch came again and Spock turned to follow his guide. Shortly they came to a large kitchen area where Spock was shown the food that was available. He didn't feel very hungry but he filled a bowl with a thick soup and sat down to eat. He knew he had to keep his strength up and the climb up the mountain followed by the last desperate run, his lack of sleep and worry about Kirk had drained him of most of his reserves.



For the next two days, Spock never left Kirk's side. The robed figures brought food and medications for Kirk, clean bedding and anything else Spock requested. Occasionally they would try to convince Spock to rest, but each time he refused.

Kirk was steadily growing weaker. He tried hard to swallow the fluids Spock would feed him, knowing the price his body would pay but trying in any way he could to ease Spock's desperate worry. But each time he attempted to eat, the terrible nausea and cramps would return.

Spock was dozing on the bed with Kirk propped up in his arms. Over the past hours a pronounced gurgling sound had been accompanying Kirk's breathing as his lungs slowly filled with fluid. Spock had then discovered that Kirk rested more comfortably when he was almost sitting up, and remained quieter if Spock held him.

A sharp coughing bout woke Spock instantly. He held Kirk firmly until the Human sagged back against him.

"Spock?"

"I am here, Jie."

Slowly Kirk brought his hand up and covered the lean, warm ones that crossed his chest. "Thought you had gone..."

"Where would I go?"

"Don't...don't know." There was a momentary struggle as Kirk tried not to cough and was unsuccessful. "Shit," he said weakly when he had finally finished. He cradled his head back onto Spock's shoulder. "Don't let me... drift," he said, fighting to get the words out. "I'm afraid...may not wake...up..." Another desperate bout of coughing shook him. Spock again lifted him into his arms.

"Lie still, Jie," he said softly. He made sure the thick cloth covering the herbs and salves was still in place, then wrapped the brown robe close and put his arms around Kirk, a warm feeling flooding through him as Kirk's hand once again covered his own. Then he began to tell Kirk about everything he had seen, of the separate society that dwelt in the mountain temple, of their quiet lives of contemplation. As he talked, he felt Kirk's hand slowly slip from on top of his. He shifted his hold until he could feel Kirk's heart. It was still pounding rapidly. He had obviously once again slipped into unconsciousness. However, Spock kept talking as time passed. Kirk had been

afraid. If he woke to silence, his terror would only be that much worse.

In his concern over Kirk, Spock had no idea how long the silent figure had been standing there watching them. As they looked at each other, Spock fell silent. There was an unusual air of dignity surrounding the tall figure. Unlike the others, this one did not wear the simple brown robe but one of a ruby colour. The front of the robe was beautifully embroidered. With a slight feeling of surprise, Spock recognized the pattern as the same that he had seen carved into the floor of the temple chamber. The figure carried a thick cloth of the same colour folded over his arm.

Spock felt Kirk stir under his hands. He looked down to see blank confusion in Kirk's now open eyes.

"Jim?"

Kirk pulled away, fear flickering across his face. "No, you can't kill him!"

"Kill who? Jim, what...?"

"No, Spock, you can't be dead! Please, no!" A violent spell of coughing shook Kirk as Spock suddenly realized that Kirk was hallucinating.

"Jim," he said gently but firmly as the coughing gradually died down. "I am not dead. I am here." He took hold of Kirk's hands tightly. "I am here, Jim, alive, with you!"

Kirk looked at him, his eyes bright with tears of pain and loss. "My fault. I should have realized...would still be alive...Romulans. Not a Romulan...Vulcan..." Suddenly he wrenched himself out of Spock's grip and off the bed, flinging himself at the silent figure by the door. "He's a Vulcan! He hates violence! He didn't deserve to die because of your fear!"

The silent figure caught Kirk's raging body just as the Human collapsed in another fit of coughing. When he had finally finished, he was swung up into strong arms and returned to the bed. As Spock reached out to take him, his hand momentarily met that of the robed figure and he was startled by the compassion that emanated from the figure.

Once Kirk was settled, the unseen face turned toward Spock and the silent voice that touched his mind was strangely melodious. Spock knew instantly that he had never heard this voice before and he knew he would never forget it. *Your ship is returning. You must prepare to leave. There is nothing we can do for him here.*

They were both disturbed by a moan from Kirk. "Spock, Spock, please be here..." A driving cough shook the rest of his breath from his body.

Instantly Spock knelt at his side. "I am, Jim. Hold on, the ship is almost here." Kirk doubled over, the cough and cramps more than he could take. Spock wrapped his arms around the convulsing body, desperately trying to let Kirk know he was there, trying to ease some of the terrible pain.

Finally the coughing died away. Carefully Spock lifted Kirk up so he was once again lying propped up in the Vulcan's arms. His struggle for breath continued unabated.

The beautiful voice came again. *Your friend is very sick, but your love for him sustains him. He lives when you are here - his love cried out the times you were gone, a love we could not answer. Go in peace and continue to live your love. He held out the thick ruby cloth. When you leave, this is yours to take - his to own. He gave a cover such as this to you to express his love. We wish to do the same.*

"Why?"

For being who he is, for showing us who you are. It is said a world should always be a better place because a man has lived. You have shown us that this can indeed happen.

Spock's curiosity finally got the best of him. "Who are you?"

The ruby-robed figure stood silent for a minute. *We have never had reason to reveal ourselves to others.*

"Yet you have had outworlders here before."

Outworlders?

Carefully Spock eased Kirk into a more comfortable position, then looked up. "On my planet, Vulcan, we have a very structured society. Each has his own place, each contributes in a positive way..."

You also have a very closed society if I understand the meaning of the word you used.

"As you appear to have," said Spock quietly.

For a moment silence drew out, then the soft thoughts again touched Spock's mind. *Have your people ever been conquered?* Spock shook his head. The ruby-robed figure turned away. *The simple ones of this world were once because none of us reached out to help. The various factions cared only about themselves, not each other... There was a long pause. The simple ones were almost destroyed.*

Spock felt Kirk gradually grow limp in his arms. He quickly checked the still-racing heart. The robed figure turned back, sensing Spock's distraction.

"Unconscious," said Spock, his fingers still holding Kirk's pulse.

The figure nodded. *Your ship is almost here.*

Spock gently moved Kirk so he was leaning against the pile of rolled up covers, then stood up. "Obviously you did not allow the conquerors to continue here."

No, fortunately we realized the error of our thinking. We are no longer fragmented, each unto his own. We discovered that all intelligent beings consist of three parts - the mind, the body and the spirit.

"And you have patterned your society on that basis," said Spock, suddenly starting to understand. "The mind is your ruling council - the Elders, the Bruisers..."

Yes, they make the laws. They are the visible, rational part that the simple ones see. The body is the part of us that protects.

"Plus," nodded Spock. "The body is the military aspect. And you are...?"

The spirit, the guiding force. It is rare that we are needed. We have many such as Magas who are an extension of us, and who are capable in all situations. Yet, there can be exceptions...

"Exceptions?"

Yes. Until you and your Captain arrived, we had found the presence of strangers unpleasant and in many cases dangerous to the stability of our society.

"You are close to the Romulan Empire," said Spock.

Empires and federations are not things with which we are familiar. We have never had either reason or desire to reach out beyond ourselves. Nor after that one time have we allowed others to remain.

"So that is why there are no Romulans," said Spock almost to himself. "You..." He was distracted again as Kirk started to shift restlessly as consciousness returned and which inevitably brought on another violent coughing spell. When he finally looked up again, the room was empty.



McCoy came limping into his office, his face pale. "My God, Spock," he said, "if we had arrived a half hour later, Jim would have been dead! As it is he's as sick as the devil, but he'll be all right." He collapsed onto the chair behind his desk. "What happened down there?"

Spock quickly described their flight from the town to the mountaintop, and of Kirk's worsening condition as they went. McCoy nodded as he spoke.

"Thank God for computers," he said softly. "I never thought I'd see the day when I'd say that, but if it wasn't for the information stored in that blasted contraption there is no way we would have been able to diagnose what Jim has." He looked at Spock. "Jim was - is - suffering from something called Acute Mountain Sickness. It is a real disease even if the name seems a bit odd. And in all my years as a doctor, I have never seen anyone follow a line of classic symptoms like Jim has with this. What you described is just like reading the computer printout. Jim had everything listed - headaches, nausea, the tight chest, violent cough, balance loss, irregular stop and go breathing, rapid heartbeat, filled lungs, apathy - especially the apathy, the apparent giving up. That wasn't Jim but the disease. As a matter of fact, he had everything listed under symptoms. In a way I'm glad I wasn't there; I think I would have panicked."

Spock's eyebrow rose, but he didn't say anything.

"It apparently can affect Humans after a week or so at an altitude of ten thousand feet or above, and it really wreaks havoc about sixteen thousand..."

"I didn't know," said Spock softly.

"Hell, there was no reason why you should. I'd never heard of it either. And you know what the dearest part is? The treatment! You get the patient back below ten thousand feet as fast as you can. That's the cure!"

"That's the cure?" echoed Spock.

McCoy nodded. "That's essentially it. Oh, Jim's got complications. His lungs are filled with fluid, he's managed to rupture quite a lot of tissue in his throat and diaphragm from the severity of his cough, but all other symptoms appear to be fading fast. I'd like to chalk it up to another one of my miracle cures, but I'm afraid I had nothing to do with it. Getting him back up here to proper, or at least normal, atmospheric conditions did the trick." He looked at Spock curiously, his eyes taking in the brown robe that the Vulcan was wearing, identical to the one Kirk had had on when they had been beamed aboard. "You haven't said very much about those last people you met. Who were they?"

"I have no idea, people like ourselves, they said. Although I don't understand how, they appeared to be expecting our arrival and did everything they could to help."

"Certainly a different reaction from those on the lower level..." McCoy broke off as the intercom whistled. "McCoy here."

"A priority message from Starfleet for either the Captain or Mister Spock," came Uhura's voice.

"Spock can take it," said McCoy, "he's right here."

"Aye, sir. Mister Spock, Starfleet Command sends highest commendations on your successful mission to Lacton and arrangements are being made for formal talks to begin concerning the availability of Triosis to the Federation." She paused for a moment as McCoy noted Spock's momentary look of astonishment. Then she continued. "Admiral Nogura sends his personal congratulations to Captain Kirk. That's all, sir."

Spock reached out for the intercom. "Thank you, Miss Uhura. I shall relay the message to the Captain."

McCoy slowly got to his feet. "Spock, from what you've told me, I think that world is crazy!" He looked at the Vulcan, then smiled. "You'd better get to your quarters before you collapse. Jim's going to be fine. I'll stay with him, just to be on the safe side. I'll call you if there's any change one way or the other, I promise."

Spock nodded. He knew there was no way he could keep going now that he knew Kirk was going to live. Hearing McCoy's reassuring words had drained him of any remaining strength he had left. He painfully got up and made his way back into the Sickbay, stopping briefly beside Kirk's sleeping figure, his heart lightening at the sound of the even, easy breathing and the returning healthy skin tone, so unlike the harsh, gasping breathing and ashen pallor that had been so recently present.

Spock finally made his way to his quarters and collapsed onto his bed, too tired even to take off the soft brown robe. He lay silent, his mind a blank, refusing to deal with the astonishing message from Starfleet.

Do not worry. What you heard was real. We do desire the contact of your kind.

Spock shot up into a sitting position. The soft, melodious voice was back.

You have shown us much, and your people will be welcome to come in peace to share what we have.

"Plas will not harm them? There are many different types, many who resemble the Romulans you fear."

They will never know of him. He is a protector, nothing more. You have shown that there is no need of him.

Nagas will be able to manage that which needs to be done.

"Why have you changed?"

It is not we who have changed; it is what you and your Captain have shown from our first contact.

"First contact?"

When it was decided to send you to Lacton. We followed as he struggled with his truths. We saw your love - and his. It told us much.

It was hours later when Spock finally woke. He was still in the brown robe and the room was silent. He would never know if it had been a dream.



Kirk was standing in silence when Spock walked into his quarters. His eyes were fixed on the intricately embroidered ruby cover on the bed, the beauty of its alien make stunning to the eye.

"You sent for me, Captain?"

"What is that?"

"Someone's way of thanking you."

"For what?"

"For being who you are."

"Spock, you're not making a whole lot of sense."

Spock smiled slightly. "Jim, I find the past few days have made very little sense."

Kirk nodded slowly. "I know what you mean, but at least you can remember most of them. If my lungs weren't so sore, it would be hard to believe it happened." He sat down on the edge of the bed, his fingers lightly tracing the intricate design, then he looked up at Spock. "All right, now that McCoy has finally released me to my own quarters, and I seem to be able to stay awake for longer than ten minutes at a time, would you mind filling me in on what happened?"

Spock moved forward and sat beside him. Taking a deep breath, he looked at the cover, then at Kirk. "I shall do my best, Captain, but there is every possibility that you are not going to believe it. After all, I did not believe in your Shangri-la."

"Try me," said Kirk with a smile.

In the back of his mind, Spock felt the touch of another soft smile. Suddenly he knew the story would make sense and he knew Kirk would believe him for he, too, had felt that same smile.

"Very well, Captain, where would you like me to begin?"





The Sun is No Friend of the Dead

Kirk lay face down on the damp cell floor where they had flung him. The screams of his agony were gradually dying away, but the fingers of his left hand were still tightly gripping at the stone beneath him. His tears came unheeded and unchecked.

Tonight they had broken him. By slow, methodical torture on a body which could no longer stand the torment, they had reduced him to this - a sobbing, desperate man, ready to talk and then end his life in any way he could. Except he could not bring himself to shift his position. As terrible as the pain was when he lay still, it doubled when he attempted to move.

He had not meant to break. The Prandans had held him for some time - he could not remember how long. Spock could tell him, but they had taken Spock from him. For how long? Hours, days - he did not know.

Spock. Tonight they had told him of Spock's death, and told him how he had died. He could have taken anything else, but not this. Now he was alone, alone to face the incredible pain, the massive bruising that marked his body, the swollen joints that made him scream as they moved.

As his captors had moved them, watching, savoring his pleas for mercy which never came. His right arm lay by his head, discolored by one huge black bruise that ran from his upper arm to his fingertips. The elbow and wrist were badly swollen, his fingers twisted in claw-like fashion - useless.

At first it hadn't been too bad, and he was able to stand up to their captors. Then, gradually, the mysterious bruises that had started appearing weeks earlier started getting worse, until now his body was a mass of discolorations and screaming pain.

At first Spock was there; the warmth of his touch and the soothing words had helped him cope with the pain. The gentle contact had taken the agony from the center of his consciousness and made it bearable.

Now that comfort had been taken from him. Spock was gone. Now, unknown to the Prandans, Kirk had broken. After they had dragged him back to his dank cell and flung him down the steps, he had cried out that they had won. But they hadn't stayed to hear. By the time he could choke out words past the screams, they had locked the door and left him.

Gradually the choking sobs began to subside as a heavy grayness started to fog his vision. His fingers clutched the stone harder as the image of Kapal, his persecutor, loomed before him. He tensed his entire body as he saw Kapal's hands reach out.

"Damn you!" he yelled. "Damn you and everyone else on this cursed planet! Leave me alone!"

The hands didn't stop coming. They latched onto his arms and he screamed at the renewed pain. The hands rolled him over. His screams stopped. He couldn't draw in enough air to yell.

Something pressed into his arm and his face contorted in agony, although again nothing escaped his lips. Voices sounded miles away. For a few moments his vision blurred, then gradually the gray blanket started to lift.

There was some sort of kit lying on the floor, but Kirk was aware of only one thing - a sharp, knife-like object among the contents. Swiftly, he grabbed it with his left hand and, with no hesitation, plunged it deeply into his chest, striking upward toward his heart. He felt a warm stickiness just before someone wrenched his hand loose from the knife.

A blurred face swam into his vision as the blood poured from his body, a face he would recognize anywhere - Spock.

The voice that met his ears was anguished. "Jim, why? We were so close - you held on for so long. It's almost morning. Remember how you struggled just to see the sunrise?"

Before he sank back into the grayness, Kirk heard his answer to the apparition that was Spock, the answer that Kapal had given him when he had choked out his defiance through the red haze of his agony, the answer he had refused to accept - until now.

"The sun is no friend of the dead."

The mission was over. James Kirk, Captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise, signed his name to the long report, then switched off the tape. He leaned back in his chair, looking at the shredded uniform lying on the floor beside the desk. He smiled slightly as he eased the aching muscles in his shoulder. Torn uniforms - they seemed to go with the job. He absently wondered how many command gold shirts had lost their lives while in his service, and how many of this new breed would die before he did.

And he knew he would die before he gave up command again. Stupidity had ruled his life once; he would not allow it to do so again. These last missions had shown him he had lost nothing during his planetside promotion. He could command. His judgement was as sound as ever.

The buzzer rang. He pressed the automatic lock and the door slid open to reveal McCoy standing there, a disapproving look on his face. "You were ordered to report to Sickbay, Captain."

Kirk smiled. "I said I'd be there when I finished this report, Doctor. I was intending to come."

"Sure," said McCoy drily. "Why don't I believe you?" He walked over to the desk and picked up the torn white shirt, marred by streaks of blood and dirt. "I trust you're in better shape than this."

"Affirmative."

"Speak English. You're beginning to sound like your First Officer."

"Bones, I'm fine, really!" But a painful stab through his shoulder caused Kirk to wince as he stood up.

"Fine, huh?" A medical scanner was running over Kirk before he could protest further. McCoy glanced at the readout. "Okay, Jim, down to Sickbay. You need some sonic treatment on that shoulder. It's the next best thing to being dislocated."

McCoy left Kirk to himself for a long time while the sonics, with their healing, penetrating rays, worked on the torn muscles and strained tendons and ligaments in Kirk's left shoulder. Kirk started reading some new reports sent from Starfleet, but the soothing rays soon lulled him to sleep.

"Captain?" A gentle touch on his arm startled Kirk out of his doze. Uhura was standing beside him, a tape in her hand. Kirk struggled to sit up, a bit embarrassed to be caught asleep. She smiled in understanding. "New orders from Starfleet, sir. I thought you might be interested in seeing them."

Kirk was still smiling when McCoy came in. "What's up, Jim? My sonic treatment can't have caused this big a change in mood."

"New orders, Bones. R & R..."

"You're kidding!" said McCoy, a wide grin splitting his face. "I thought they had decided that was an unnecessary frill for this ship. It's been six months since we shipped out..."

"So you've mentioned, frequently," said Kirk as he slipped out from under the sonic beam. "Thanks for the doctoring, Bones. I've got work to do."

"Jim, I haven't..." But the Sickbay doors were swishing closed after Kirk's departing figure. McCoy shook his head. "Someday you're going to be on your deathbed, Jim-boy, and something's going to send you flying out of Sickbay even if I'm attached to the trailing end of your coveralls!"

The Enterprise was in the Rigel system and there were many different places the crewmembers could go to spend their R & R. Most were going to the pleasure spots to work off steam. Six months of hard work were begging to be released with the wild exuberance of youth.

Kirk opted for a quiet vacation, and Spock agreed to go with him, but, try as he would, he couldn't convince McCoy to go along.

"Nope," he said with a smile. "This is the first time you and Spock have had a chance to be by yourselves since he returned to Starfleet. You don't need me butting in."

"Bones, you're hardly 'butting in'," protested Kirk. "Come on, we'd love to have you!"

"Jim," said McCoy seriously, "take it from an old friend and go with Spock. I've got some other things I want to do. I promise the next R & R I'll come with you, no matter how horrendous a time you have planned. I think it would be good for the two of you to spend some time away from this madhouse, get to know him again - the man he has become. Let him discover you, let him discover the changes in you. He knows you as his commanding officer. He knows you as a friend. Now let him know you as a person."

"You're starting to sound like an advice column for the lovelorn," said Kirk, no smile hinting as to whether he was teasing or not.

"Do I?" asked McCoy innocently.

So it was only Kirk and Spock who rented the small but powerful long-range shuttle and headed to the very outskirts of the Rigel system, to the small planet known as Nonet. It was almost a planetoid, considered to be too small to bother developing. It was used by the occasional vacationer, but most of the time was devoid of humanoid life. There was a large water mass covering the planet, dotted by smallish islands. There was constant underwater volcanic activity, which caused the shores to be bombarded by tremendous waves.

The days passed pleasantly. They picked a sheltered place on one of the long beaches and set up camp. They spent their time talking and playing chess, going for long walks, or just sitting in companionable silence. They talked of things that should have been discussed years before - a lot of hurt could have been avoided, wasted years never would have happened if they had.

But, as McCoy had said, they also discovered each other. They were different men. The three years they had been apart had moulded differences into them, made them more aware of who they were and what they wanted. This time they did not hold back; each held his open, naked truth for the other to accept or reject.

But, in one essential way, they had not changed. Kirk was still the irrepressible scamp that Vulcan logic could not contain. During his time in San Francisco, he had rediscovered surfing; but no matter how he tried, he could not convince Spock to go with him.

"Jim, there is little purpose to swimming in the first place, unless it is for exercise. I see absolutely no purpose in trying to balance on a piece of board on the side of a wave."

So Kirk had surfed alone, but Spock was always close at hand should he get into trouble. By calculating the strength of the waves and undertow created by the volcanic activity, Spock immediately saw how dangerous Kirk's surfing really was, but knew he could do nothing to talk Kirk out of doing it.

Finally Kirk pushed Spock too far. The Vulcan had planned to go exploring and had his equipment organized when Kirk came up to him carrying an object that Spock had never seen before.

"This, Mr. Spock, is a frisbee!"

Spock stood silent, a stoic look on his face. Nothing betrayed the sinking feeling in his stomach. Kirk had been bubbling all morning, hardly able to contain himself until they had finished breakfast.

Now they were standing on the sandy beach, the waves crashing in from the surging water. Kirk held out the blue plastic disk. He was wearing a bathing suit, which Spock noted showed him off to perfection, but Kirk seemed unaware of the Vulcan's scrutiny.

"Okay, Spock, you run down the beach and I'll throw you the frisbee." Spock started his patient argument against needless exercise, but it got him nowhere. Finally, with a long-suffering look, he took off his soft boots and socks and pulled the shoulder pack off over his head. Obviously Kirk wasn't going to let him go exploring unless he gave in for a while. Obediently, he trotted off down the beach. When he was far enough away, Kirk let the frisbee go with a strong swing of his arm.

With momentary surprise, Spock watched the trajectory of its flight, then he quickly computed the shape of the frisbee with wind resistance and ran over to the point where it would pass him.

From then, the challenge was on. Spock had Kirk racing all over the beach, making spectacular dives for the frisbee which Spock kept tantalizingly out of his reach. When Kirk would send the frisbee back to Spock, the Vulcan would stand motionless for a few seconds, then move calmly to the spot where the frisbee would reach him.

Spock was hard-pressed to keep the smile off his face as he watched Kirk, red-faced and out of breath, refuse to admit defeat. The Human had asked for this. Spock had put up with a lot of teasing the past few days, and he was getting revenge.

Kirk leaped high in the air as the frisbee sailed over his head. He caught it, but was badly off balance when he landed and somersaulted backwards, landing in a thick growth of stubby bushes that dotted areas of the sandy beach.

And he didn't get up.

Spock waited a split second, then raced up the beach. Kirk was lying on his back, the frisbee by his side, his right hand clutching his left shoulder.

"Jim, what happened?"

Kirk grinned slightly. "I tried to mold my shoulder into this rock," he said as he started to get up.

"Are you sure it's wise to move?"

"I'm not about to spend the rest of my vacation lying in this bush!" said Kirk firmly. Spock helped him up, then Kirk gave him a push. "Go on, Spock, you've got all your equipment. Leave me alone to salvage what's left of my pride. Go collect soil samples or something."

"Are you sure you're all right?" asked Spock dubiously.

"Yes, I'm sure. Now go on!" So Spock went, but never got far enough away to lose sight of Kirk.

As Kirk washed up, he discovered that he had long slender thorns deeply imbedded in his shoulder. He tried pulling a couple of them out, but it proved a painful procedure, so he went down to the beach, where water lay trapped in a rocky recess and was heated by the strong sun.

He soaked in the hot water for a long time, then slowly worked out the rest of the thorns. With his muscles relaxed by the heat of the water, it was a lot easier.

By the time Spock made his way back to the camp, Kirk had built a small fire and was cooking lunch. A quick glance showed him that Kirk was moving his left arm more easily than he had earlier that morning. As Kirk turned, Spock noticed a puffy, purplish swelling on Kirk's shoulder.

Kirk smiled wanly when asked about it. "Not only did I manage to land backwards in a bush, it had to be a thorn bush." He looked at Spock. "Guess that'll teach me to tease you..." Then his grin widened. "Or at least I should have picked something you couldn't figure out so easily!"



Their leave soon came to an end, and both felt genuine regret as the shuttle sped away from Monet. But even before the planet had faded from the small view screen, Kirk was already looking forward to being back on the *Enterprise*.

Spock smiled inwardly at his enthusiasm. It was something that he doubted Kirk would ever lose. He sat back in his seat. He felt no pressing desire to be back aboard the starship. He had carved out a niche for himself there, had learned to deal with Humans because of it; but if it were not for the man who sat beside him, he doubted that he would have left Vulcan again.

He thought back to the night on the beach when he had told Kirk about the Kolinahr, and what had happened the day he was to have been proclaimed a Master. *It was your voice T'Sai heard, Jim. I fought to hear only the entity, but she heard the truth I was denying. I was hearing what I wanted to without knowing it - you.*

And you feel, because of that, you failed again as a Vulcan - that you now bear the condemnation of the Masters of Gol?

Kirk had looked at him with expressive hazel eyes, shadowed by the thought that somehow he had unintentionally hurt the Vulcan yet again. Slowly Spock shook his head. *No, T'Sai is very different from T'Pol. She knew that what I was seeking was right, but a Vulcan must find his own way, so she sent me back without telling me what I was looking for. I thought I was searching for U'ger. His eyes softened. I should have known...*

"Daydreaming, Spock?" Kirk's voice broke into the Vulcan's thoughts. "I thought that was a Human failing."

"Agreed," said Spock with a slight smile. "I do indulge that half of myself occasionally."

"That's a dangerous statement," said Kirk, grinning. "If McCoy ever hears it, he'll have enough ammunition for a year..." His voice broke off as the small ship bucked a little. "Hello, what's this?" he said in a puzzled voice.

Instantly, Spock had his viewscreen activated and the computer humming as he fed figures into it. "It appears to be some sort of radiation belt, Captain," he said finally.

"Out here, in the middle of nowhere? That's unusual..." Again, he broke off as the shuttle suddenly slammed sideways and went spinning out of control. Eventually, Kirk managed to regain control of the shuttle. He reset their course, then leaned back in his chair, rubbing his already sore shoulder that he had managed to hit yet again. "You all right?" he asked.

Spock nodded. "I am undamaged, Captain, but your shoulder..."

"Is getting tired of being the brunt of punishment. Nothing serious. Any idea what we managed to run into?"

"Negative. The computer is compiling data, but I think we shall need the *Enterprise* equipment to analyze it."

"Okay, let's get back and get the location of that...that...'bump' known for local traffic."



"Well, Jim-boy, how did you enjoy...?" McCoy's voice faded away as he walked into Kirk's quarters. Kirk was just emerging from the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. McCoy's practiced eye noted that there wasn't an ounce of surplus flesh on the tanned body, but it was the purple/black bruise covering the whole of Kirk's left shoulder that left him speechless.

"My vacation?" said Kirk helpfully. "It was just what the doctor ordered. How was yours?"

"Fine. What did you do to your shoulder?"

"Got bumped around a bit."

"A bit! Does it hurt?"

Kirk shook his head. "Don't even know it's there."

McCoy looked skeptical. "Well, if it gives you any trouble, come on down to Sickbay and I'll have a go at it."

The crew arrived back more or less intact, and the *Enterprise* departed the Rigel system. They were to take up patrol in a lightly populated sector that had no pressing problems. They would ease back into work before tackling any serious business, to give everybody a chance to recover from their leave.

They spent a few days testing the engines, at Scotty's request, then Kirk set up a series of drills to ensure that the crew were on their toes. Under Kirk, the *Enterprise* had always been an efficient ship, and the newer crewmembers were discovering why. They also learned not to grumble, because they quickly found out Kirk could do their job better than they could - and often proved it.

McCoy was checking some of his diagnostic equipment when Kirk wandered in, his usual jaunty stride missing.

"What's the matter, Jim?" he asked cheerfully. "The breakfast on this tub finally get to you?"

Kirk sailed half-heartedly. "No." He hesitated for a moment. "I worked out in the gym yesterday..."

"Best thing for you."

"So you keep saying, although you never practice what you preach." He walked forward. "I took a pretty good fall..."

"Your shoulder again?"

Kirk nodded, showing an even blacker bruise than the one he had had on his return from R & R on Monet.

McCoy let out a long, slow whistle. "I think I'd better run a few tests on you. You shouldn't bruise like that, short of being run over by a moon shuttle. Then some deep sonic treatment to break up that hematoma. It'll make moving it easier."

McCoy's basic tests didn't come up with anything conclusive, so he started Kirk on multi-vitamin shots, gave him a lecture about eating properly, and sent him back to work. He also drew some blood and took tissue samples to start more elaborate testing, just in case he had overlooked something.

"A priority call, Captain." Uhura's voice had everyone suddenly alert. "Sector 231 - a freighter relaying a request from Prandan 4. Not clear on what the problem is, and they are carrying perishable goods so they don't want to spend time investigating if the *Enterprise* is available."

"Acknowledge the call, Uhura, then inform Starfleet of the possibility that we might change our course. Spock, any information on Prandan?"

"Very little. They are not members of the Federation. To our knowledge, they have no space capability. Their culture is fairly advanced..."

Before Uhura had a chance to contact the Prandans, a message came in from Starfleet. Kirk rolled his eyes heavenwards. He had just decided that it would be worthwhile to divert to Prandan 4 and find out what was going on. It would be a good opportunity to discover more about the people who lived there, and possibly introduce the Federation.

"Put it on audio over here," he said, a small smile answering Uhura's grin at his expression. New orders were sending the *Enterprise* to the other side of the sector. Kirk groaned inwardly. This was something he had fought the entire time he was Chief of Operations, and had finally managed to hold the department heads still long enough to make them realize that a starship should be allowed to finish one job before they were sent on to the next. However, it was obvious that Operations was slipping back to its confused methods.

"Uhura, get Fleet Headquarters and transfer the call down to my quarters. Spock, with me. Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

Someone's going to catch hell, thought Uhura as she opened the Starfleet channel. *He's not as patient as he used to be with Starfleet snafus.*

If Kirk had given someone hell, he had obviously had to compromise. He and Spock were going to Prandan, the *Enterprise* was going where Starfleet wanted her to go. Kirk had had a long discussion with the Prandan Commissioner. Then he waited while the High Command talked to the Prandan Commissioner. Finally they agreed to let Kirk and Spock go.

"Now hold on a doggone minute!" McCoy's voice preceded him into the transporter room. "Just where do you think you're going?"

Kirk turned around to meet an irate McCoy. "We're beaming planetside, Doctor, by request of the head of their Council..."

"And you just happened to forget to check with me, I suppose."

"I didn't know I needed your permission."

"Ordinarily you don't, but, in case you haven't noticed, there just might be something wrong with you."

"What?"

"How the hell should I know? I've just started the tests!"

"Is my being here going to make any difference?" asked Kirk mildly against McCoy's rising anger.

"Jim, that's not the point..."

"And that's not what I asked!" Then Kirk smiled. "Bones, all I'm going to do is beam down and talk to somebody. Spock will be with me. I promise not to hit my shoulder again, okay?"

"I could come with you..."

"Would that speed up the test results?"

McCoy glared at him for a moment, then sighed. "Okay, okay, I concede." He watched the two men disappear in the transporter beam, then headed back for the lab. He had a lot of work to do. As soon as Scotty received word that Kirk and Spock had arrived safely, the big ship left orbit.



Kirk and Spock were greeted by a delegation of Prandans. They were a very tall people, averaging a good seven feet, but otherwise very much like humanoids Kirk and Spock had met throughout the galaxy.

They were taken to an elaborate waiting room and politely asked to sit. Spock looked around. "It appears to be quite a materialistic society, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "Outwardly, at least. I wonder what this Kapal is like..."

"Why don't you ask me, Captain James Kirk?" Kirk and Spock swung around to find themselves facing a room full of Klingons. "I am Kapal," said one, stepping forward.

"What is this all about, Commander?" demanded Kirk in an icy voice.

"We need answers, Captain. Some months ago, a destructive space invader passed through our Empire. We tracked it into your Federation, then to your Earth, where it disappeared. We want to know what it was, where it is now..."

"Is that all?" said Kirk. "Commander, all you had to do was contact Starfleet. The information concerning V'ger is not classified..."

"Isn't it, Captain? A likely story, and I personally want to know why the *Enterprise* survived when the finest ships in our Fleet were destroyed when they came into contact with it."

Kirk's eyes darkened. "You should know by now that you're picking on the wrong people..."

"Are we?" Kapal walked forward. "You were promoted to flag rank, Kirk - the Admiralty, I believe you call it. Admirals are soft - you are soft..." His eyes flicked to Spock. "I should kill you now, Vulcan, but, according to our reports, we would lose any hold we might have over Kirk. So it will be your lot to watch our persuasion. You will die anyway. Now or later, it makes little difference."

He called out, and a group of Prandans entered the room. Kirk and Spock were led to a large, empty cell. Spock was firmly chained to the wall. He fought, but the chains were made of an alloy he had not seen before, and they defied his Vulcan strength.

Six Prandans remained with Kapal, the other Klingons left. "They are going back to my ship, Kirk," said Kapal, "then they join the Fleet that is going to intercept the *Enterprise*. The remains of your ship will be taken back to our Empire to be examined at our leisure."

"So it doesn't matter if I don't talk," said Kirk, his eyes flashing deep-seated anger.

"Of course it matters. If you talk, your friend here, and your crew, will be allowed an easy death. If you don't, you will be witness to one of the cruelest exterminations ever conducted by our warships." He motioned to the Prandans. "Bring him. Leave the other here."



Kirk knew a mountain had fallen on him. He had been caught in enough rockslides to know the feeling. Gingerly, he checked his arms and legs, but they moved fairly easily. No rockslide. He opened his eyes.

Spock was sitting beside him, his eyes closed, fingers touching the familiar entry points on Kirk's face. Kirk lay still for a minute, wondering why he hadn't felt the familiar presence of Spock in his mind. Well, it had been over three years; maybe he had forgotten what it felt like.

"Eavesdropping, Mr. Spock?" he asked quietly.

Slowly Spock's eyes opened, but he did not remove his hands. "Jim, I do not recommend you try to move. You have received a brutal beating. I am attempting to block some of the pain and maintain normal blood pressure, so you can regain your strength more rapidly."

A partial healing trance. Spock had used it with him before, but only when death... "Spock...?"

"Hush, Jim. Another half hour. Please, lie still." He did not mention the tremendous bruises that covered Kirk's body, or the huge swelling in Kirk's left shoulder. All of that would be only too apparent when the meld was broken.



The *Enterprise* was moving at warp 7 when the ships appeared at extreme sensor range. Scotty immediately called yellow alert. A couple of ships was not an unusual occurrence; four were.

"They are Klingon warships, Mr. Scott," said Chekov, his eyes glued to his sensors, "K't'inga class cruisers."

"What the blue devil are they doing there? Uhura, try to contact them and then get hold of Starfleet fast. I don't like the looks of this. Those are awfully powerful ships, and 4 to 1 odds aren't good if they're spoiling for a fight."

McCoy was aware that trouble was brewing, but other than making sure his department was ready, there was little he could do about it. He and a couple of his assistants were working on samples of blood and tissue that he had taken from Kirk. McCoy didn't really think there was anything seriously wrong, but the bruising was abnormal and obviously hurt, so he might as well look into it.

"Dr. McCoy..." McCoy looked up to see one of his assistants hovering in the doorway. "Uh, I think I've found something, sir."

McCoy put down the slide he had been looking at. "Something interesting?"

"Something impossible."

McCoy felt a cold tug at his heart. "What?"

"When I was running tests on the plasma proteins, I noticed a problem with the coagulation time. It is taking three to four times longer to pull a suitable fibrin clot."

"What are you saying?" said McCoy, knowing full well what the technician was saying, but finding it impossible to believe.

"For some reason I can't fathom, the Captain's blood is losing its clotting capability. A cut that should stop bleeding in five minutes or so would now bleed much longer - thirty to forty minutes..."

McCoy sat looking at the technician, an expression of horror starting to cross his face. "Those are the symptoms of hemophilia."

The technician nodded. "To all intents and purposes, that is what Captain Kirk is developing."

"But he's not a hemophiliac!"

"Sir, he will be soon..."



They were tied out in the hot sun, just far enough away from each other that they couldn't touch. Kirk had not moved in hours, had not dared to try. His control was very tenuous. Spock had not exaggerated when he said the degree of pain would be more than Kirk would be able to handle.

But he had said it as a challenge, deliberately. Kirk would be difficult, if not impossible to break. To say to his face that he could be overcome was almost to ensure that it wouldn't happen quickly.

The heat from the strong sun was making Kirk's head pound. "Spock," he said finally, "we've got to get out of here."

Spock knew better than to argue with that tone of voice. They would quite probably die in the attempt, but at least it would save Kirk from more of this. He saw Kirk start struggling with his bonds, listened to the choked breathing as the rope bit deep into the swollen wrists.

"Jim, wait, I think I can get free!" Gratefully, Kirk stopped. He had been trying to cope with unbelievable pain. Only Spock had held him together. Alone, he wasn't sure he would have made it this far through the endless grilling sessions, beatings, and now this heat.

Kirk's uniform was streaked with dried blood. Through the melds, Spock managed to eventually stop the bleeding caused by pounding fists, but if Kirk ever got badly cut, he wasn't sure he could manage to control it.

So far they had done nothing to the Vulcan. Each morning they would take Kirk, and hours later would return his unconscious body. Spock would patch him up the best he could. Every night Kirk would fight against the pain, setting himself the goal of seeing the rising sun. Each day Kirk grew weaker, and Spock found himself wondering if keeping him alive was the kindest thing to do.

"Got it!" Quickly, Spock was on his feet and across to where Kirk was sitting. Carefully he untied him and helped him to his feet.

They ran until they were exhausted, until they could go no further; then the Prandans closed around them and brought them back. They had been followed all the way. It was just another part of their ordeal.

"So, Captain," said Kapał, "you like to run, do you?" He looked at the Prandans. "Stun the Vulcan," he ordered. Spock fought, but was soon slumped on the floor, unable to move, anguished eyes fixed on Kirk.

"All right," said Kapał, moving towards Kirk. "I want answers, and I want them now!" A blow caused Kirk to lose his balance, and he fell backwards on top of Spock.

"Go to hell!" he said as he struggled to free himself from the Vulcan's limp body.

"From what I understand of your hell, I probably will," grinned Kapal, "but if I do, I'm taking you with me. Is that clear?"

"Not if I can get you there first!"

Kapal walked over to Kirk and grabbed his shoulders. He had not expected the cry of agony as his hand sank into the black swelling under Kirk's tunic. Slowly he drove the Human down onto his back.

Kapal did not notice Spock, did not see that the stun effect was wearing off. It was only by the quick action of the closest Prandan that Kapal did not die on the spot.



"Doctor, I appreciate the gravity of the situation. I know what hemophilia is, but we've got four Klingon war cruisers trying to hack us into little pieces. If you have any suggestions as to how to get out of this mess, I'd gladly go back and take on the entire planet!"

"I know, Scotty, I know. Thanks for listening to me." McCoy switched off the intercom and smashed his fist down on the table. "Blast it, man was never meant to be in space anyway! If he was, he'd have been born wearing a spacesuit!" He looked at his technicians. "Well, don't just stand there, find out what's going on and how to fix it!"

"Sir, there's no cure for hemophilia." The technician immediately wished he had never opened his mouth. McCoy didn't lose his temper often, but he was about to be at the receiving end of one of those times.

Somehow McCoy managed to maintain control. "No, but you're talking about genetic hemophilia, and that is not what the Captain has. This has a cause, and we're damn well doing to find it!"

Suddenly the *Enterprise* shook under the onslaught of the attacking Klingons. "Get to work!" said McCoy sharply. "You are excused from all unnecessary duties, including eating and sleeping, until you come up with something." He glared at them, then turned and headed for Sickbay.



Kirk lay shivering in the cold cell. His head was between Spock's open knees, Spock's fingers once again holding the meld, his mind desperately trying to control Kirk's mounting weakness.

Spock had been trying to deny the only logical alternative for several hours. Kirk was badly hurt. Spock suspected that, had he not been there to achieve the partial healing meld, Kirk would now be dead, overwhelmed by shock and injury. Through the meld he could feel the determination of Kirk's struggle, but the Human body could take only so much, and Kirk was almost at his limit.

There was one other way left to them - to him, if Kirk would accept it. However, Spock didn't know if he would have the courage to offer it, or follow through if it was accepted.

"That was a foolish move, you know," Kirk finally said.

"What was?"

"Attacking Kapal. I suspect it will cause you some trouble."

"Undoubtedly." Spock knelt in silence for a few minutes. "How do you feel now?"

"Don't ask. I'd only upset you if I was anywhere near truthful. Can I sit up?"

A rhetorical question, thought Spock to himself. "If you like," he said aloud. He helped Kirk to a sitting position.

Kirk choked back a cry as his mind took the full brunt of the latest torture. "Oh, God! Spock...!" He tried to reach out for the Vulcan but his arms refused, his shoulders and right elbow swollen beyond belief.

"Jim," Spock's hand rested on Kirk's forehead, "don't try to be brave. Give in to the pain..."

"Can't...won't...!" It was Kirk's stubborn resistance against agony he could no longer stand which gave Spock the courage he lacked. Kirk gasped as Spock's hand slid to the back of his neck. His eyes opened wide as he recognized the grip.

Spock's throat closed as he saw the look in Kirk's eyes. He wanted to cry out a denial, to take Kirk into his arms and hold him safe forever. But he couldn't. He forced his shaking hand to remain in position.

"Jim." His eyes mirrored the turmoil going on inside him. "They are kill..." His voice broke and he swallowed hard. "They are killing you bit by bit. If they...if they take me from you, you will surely break before you die..." He could feel the tears start down his face but he did nothing to deny them. "I could...prevent that."

"No!" The word was a low moan, then turned to a cry of denial as Kirk saw the truth of Spock's words. "No, no..." Suddenly, like Spock, he was crying, crying as he never had before in his life. Spock awkwardly tried to hold him, but there was no way of doing it without causing more agonizing pain. So they sat on the cold stone, Human and alien, exposing more of themselves to the other than either would have believed possible.



Kirk had no idea how much time had passed. The questions beat at him but he was beyond being able to respond, to comprehend what was being asked. His pain would not have allowed him to talk, even if he had wanted to try. Spock had told him not to be brave, and he was long past the point where he was capable of it. They were effectively and methodically killing him. Gradually, the idea of Spock's offer of *Tal Shaya* didn't seem unthinkable.

Hold onto that! screamed through Kirk's mind. *He will do that much for you. He loves you enough to do it.*

A face was suddenly close to his, and Kapal's contempt spat out with his words. "Well, Captain, is this how the elite of Starfleet bears up under adversity? I was right when I said you were soft. I would think you would be one to hide in the dark."

"The...sun al...always...rises!" gasped Kirk, refusing to back away from the Klingon.

"Captain, the sun is no friend of the dead."



When they took Kirk back to the cell, Spock was gone. There were no gentle hands to accept his pain; there was no soft presence, no strong support. The Vulcan understood what he had not understood himself, that death was preferable to breaking, and had offered the ultimate gift. Spock was to have been the instrument of his death.

"Spock!" The name reverberated off the walls over and over again. Finally Kirk lay exhausted, tears running down his face. One thought had kept him going - that Spock would be there to end this for him before he lost control. It was the only thought that had kept him from breaking. Now he didn't even have the strength left to kill himself. Kapal would have his way, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.



"I heard you were calling for your friend, Captain Kirk." Kapal's voice came from very far away. "I'm afraid he's no longer able to help you. I am intrigued by the control Vulcans have over pain. I decided to test a pet theory of mine." He took hold of Kirk's head between his hands. "Do I have your attention, Captain? I want you to savor every detail."

Kirk wasn't sure he was still sane when they finally finished with him. Spock was dead, and Kapal's graphic description of how he had died vied with the screaming pain in Kirk's mind and body. They asked him one final time if he wanted to talk, just before throwing him down the steps of his cell, and his mind cried out, *Yes! Anything! But kill me after I've told you!*

But nothing left his throat, no words could push past the agony. So they never knew they had won. Now he would end it. Whoever left that knife had allowed him the only way out - and he took it. And Spock was waiting for him, as he knew he would be.



"Oh, my God!" McCoy knelt for a moment in frozen horror, staring at the knife that Kirk had just grabbed from the medikit and plunged into his chest. "Jim, what the...?" Quickly, he grabbed a pressure pack. "Why? Why death?" he asked as he peeled Kirk's hand from the knife's shaft.

Spock was kneeling beside McCoy a deathly cold hand twisting his heart. There was only one reason Kirk had done this - because he, the logical Vulcan, had given up. Throughout their ordeal, Kirk had held out the illogical hope, and he had taken that from Kirk. He had buried that knife in Kirk's chest as surely as Kirk had himself.

"Because...because I suggested it, Doctor," he said as he held the pressure pack tightly over the wound while McCoy sealed it. "A few hours ago it...it seemed the only alternative." He missed the shocked look McCoy threw at him.

"Well," said McCoy, not realizing the depths of Spock's agony, "he might just have won. Come on, let's get him out of here. We can't do much tripping over each other in this damned cell."

"Can we move him?"

"I don't know. We might kill him, but he'll die here if we don't."

"The transporter?"

"Not in his state."

Spock nodded. "Give me a few minutes, then we can get him to a shuttlecraft." Once again Spock went deep into Kirk's mind and took part of the agony for himself. "Now, Doctor!" he said in a strained voice.

McCoy yelled out, and Kirk was carefully placed on a stretcher; but by the time they had reached the shuttlecraft, Kirk was openly crying and Spock rapidly weakening.

McCoy had everyone stop. "We can't transfer him like this," he muttered. "We're going to kill both of them." He touched Spock's arm and the Vulcan gradually withdrew from the meld. McCoy activated his communicator and contacted the biochemistry lab. "What about the drugs?" he asked. "Have you found anything more effective that's less dangerous?"

"No, sir," came the answer. "Synthetic morphine is still the best."

"And it is still addictive!" snapped McCoy, his fear and frustration finally getting the best of him. "All right, I've got some with me. We'll transport the Captain in a few minutes. McCoy out."

He knelt by the stretcher. "Jim, I'm going to give you something to help dull the pain. It will take a few minutes to work." As McCoy waited for the medication to take hold, he felt a hand on his arm.

"Doctor." McCoy looked up into Spock's anguished eyes. "What's wrong with him?"

McCoy looked down at the semi-conscious man. "By means I can't even guess at, Jim's developing a form of hemophilia. His blood is losing its ability to clot. The scanner shows he's also very anemic, and there is a tremendous amount of inner seepage - blood filling up tissues, draining into joints..."

Spock's eyes went to Kirk, to the bruises and bloodstained pressure pack over the knife wound in his chest. "Will he bleed to death?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, but what he can't do is manufacture the enzyme that is necessary to clot his blood. However, thrombin is easy enough to synthesize. The problem is to clean up damage from the inner bleeding - the swelling of the joints and the pain that goes with it."

"The cure?"

"I don't know if there is one. I don't even know what's caused this." McCoy found he couldn't look at Spock. "We can replace any blood he's lost by transfusion, which will stop the anemia. We can pack his swollen limbs in ice to reduce pain and slow the bleeding. Eventually, we can put air pressure packs on the joints to reabsorb the excess blood. Other than that, all we can do is try to prevent him from hurting himself."

"Are you seriously saying that we should curb him, cut him off from the only life he has ever wanted to live?"

McCoy took a deep breath. "He can't retain command; he's too active. There's no way he'd be willing to stand on the sidelines. He's a leader, Spock, in every sense of the word, and, in this case, it could kill him."

Spock looked down at Kirk for a moment, then turned away before McCoy had a chance to say anything else. "Come, it is time to return to the *Enterprise*."



Their problems were just beginning when they got Kirk to Sickbay. He was so badly injured, the joints of his arms so swollen that the pain would not allow him to lie still. No amount of morphine seemed to do much good.

The deep knife wound refused to stop bleeding. The pressure pack had slowed the flow, and they would be able to keep his blood pressure stable with transfusions until the bleeding stopped; but the constant draining of his system, complicated by shock and Kirk's apparent willingness to die, was setting up impossible obstacles.

"Spock, I'm lost. I don't know what to do with him." McCoy had never felt so helpless.

"Doctor, you said that ice packs would slow the bleeding..."

"There's no way he could stand the pressure."

"No, but what about suspending him in the whirlpool, set at its lowest temperature with the element turned off?"

For a moment McCoy brightened, then he shook his head. "Wouldn't work. He's bleeding in too many places. Water would just draw it out that much faster."

Spock refused to be discouraged. "You said pressure would help to reabsorb the blood..."

"Pressure? Spock, he can't even support the weight of a hand!"

"The new environmental suits mould to the body with no extra pressure. One would effectively seal out the water, but cause no additional pain."

"Spock, you're a genius!"

The whirlpool was filled with cool water. McCoy tranquilized Kirk as much as he dared, and they somehow got the environmental suit on him, after having first put pressure packs over the many cuts. Then they lowered Kirk into the water, securing him so his head stayed above the surface.

After several hours, Kirk's body started to relax for the first time, the cold finally bringing some relief. But he remained in a semi-conscious state, not knowing where he was or who was with him. The only things clear to him were that Spock was dead and that he had broken. He had attempted the one thing left, tried to take the only way out. He had tried to kill himself and he had failed. The Klingons were obviously fighting to keep him alive for some reason, but he was doing nothing to help. He had little strength left, and no fight. He no longer wanted to live.

Spock and McCoy stood by the whirlpool. McCoy's exhaustion and frustration sounded in his voice. "As yet, we have no idea what's causing this, Spock. So far only the factor 8 has been affected, but for all we know the other proteins could become affected as well." He looked at Kirk. "Thank God it's a gradual process, or the Prandan's torture would have killed him for sure."

"The wounds he has now..."

McCoy hesitated for a moment. "I'm going to have to operate soon and close that knife wound. Projections show that, in a couple of hours, he will be much closer to developing classic hemophilia symptoms, and surgery will be that much riskier." They stood in silence for a few minutes, then McCoy sighed. "Well, I'd better get going." He looked up at Spock. "I just wish I knew what to do, how to deal with this."

It was a nerve-racking procedure, but McCoy finally got the knife wound closed. By some miracle Kirk had missed all major blood vessels and only just nicked his left lung.

An hour later, Kirk was back in the whirlpool, heavily sedated and finally asleep. McCoy stayed for a while, then left Spock sitting with Kirk and headed off to bed. He needed a break, and his nerves needed a few minutes when they weren't standing straight up on end.



Kirk had six hours of blessed relief, then he woke to blinding pain. He thrashed in the water, his constant struggles threatening the delicate new healing.

McCoy stood helplessly beside the Vulcan. "He can't go on like this, Spock. The latest tests show his blood's almost lost its ability to clot."

Spock took a deep breath. "Perhaps a meld..." He broke off as McCoy shook his head.

"You were lucky you got away with it the first time. If the onset of this problem hadn't been so gradual, the changes in blood pressure could very well have compounded the shock and you would have lost him."

Spock looked at Kirk. "It might have been kinder than what I did offer him," he said softly.

"Offered him?"

Spock nodded. "He was...he was breaking, and they were threatening to separate us. I knew he could not cope with that much pain by himself, nor could he accept the reality of breaking. I...I offered him an alternative," he said, his voice only a whisper.

With sudden understanding, McCoy knew that it was death that Spock had offered. It explained the comment Spock had made earlier, that he had been the cause of Kirk's desperate attempt to take his own life.

Spock didn't pay any attention to McCoy. He stood staring at Kirk for a minute, then, to McCoy's astonishment, he slowly stripped down to his underwear and swung his legs over the edge of the whirlpool. He carefully lowered himself into the cool water, and McCoy could see the lean body immediately start to shiver. He didn't know what Spock was going to do, but knew he had better stay out of it.

Spock moved forward and gently took hold of Kirk's hands. "Jim," he said sharply, "look at me!" He had to say it several times, but finally the hazel eyes opened. "Hold onto my hands." Kirk painfully moved his fingers until he was returning Spock's hold. "Good," said Spock, a gentle smile curving the corners of his mouth. "Now, listen very carefully to what I am saying, and keep looking at me."

Slowly McCoy realized that Spock was using a form of hypnosis as he talked. His quiet voice went on and on, never changing. His eyes never left Kirk's face and he kept his gentle hold of Kirk's hands.

Gradually Kirk began to relax. As he did, the pain started to recede from the center of his consciousness. Eventually he fell into an exhausted sleep, the pain now controlled enough to allow him some rest.

"It is only temporary," said Spock as McCoy helped him out of the whirlpool and wrapped a thermal blanket around the Vulcan's shaking body. "The pain will be back when he wakes."

"But at least now we can control it!" said McCoy with a wide grin.



The Sickbay was silent when Kirk woke, the lights dimmed to a gentle glow. With some surprise, he noted that he was wearing an environmental suit and was stretched out in water. He shivered slightly from the chill. Where was he? What was going on?

He felt something warm on his wrist, and realized that fingers were resting on his pulse. He looked over and was stunned to see Spock lying stretched out on his stomach on a bed which was pushed up beside the tank he was suspended in. The Vulcan's eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even.

He's alive! thought Kirk. *They said he was dead. Kapal...* Suddenly he froze, memories flooding back - their captors, the incredible pain, Spock's offer of *Tal Shaya* - and his breaking.

"No!" he said softly as he slowly realized where he must be. He was still alive and he was back aboard the *Enterprise*. He hadn't died - and he should have died. He must have broken. Why else would they have given him back?

And he remembered the reason for his breaking. He had held out against everything the Klingons had done - until Spock had died. Too often in the past he had had to make the choice, and always Spock had been sacrificed, just as he knew, for the same reasons, Spock would sacrifice him.

Yet this time it was different. When Spock had stood in front of him with the inexplicable news that he was

leaving Starfleet to go back to Vulcan, something had died within Kirk. Kirk continued to be the brilliant officer of old, but people became just that - people, outside him, not known. But Spock was known, and Kirk knew he could not bear to lose him again. Spock had shown him that the Kirk he had become was not a man he liked, yet that man could command. He was not sure this one should, not if his judgment and values could be so easily dictated by the importance of one person above all others. He pulled his hand away from Spock, unwilling to share any contact with him in case Spock found out, hating himself for his weakness, hating everyone around him.

Instantly Spock's eyes snapped open and he was off the bed. "Jim?"

"No!" The single, anguished word stopped Spock cold. All of Kirk's emotion came out in the one word. Their eyes held, and Spock could see that Kirk was desperately trying to deny the naked truths they had shared back on Prandan. Giving himself a minute to try to get his thoughts together, Spock went and contacted McCoy.

McCoy came flying in the door before Spock had a chance to say anything to Kirk. His face was beaming as he went about his preliminary checks. "How do you feel, Jim?" he finally asked.

Kirk sloshed his hands through the water, then looked at McCoy. "Cold and sore."

"You can thank Spock for that," said McCoy cheerfully. "If it hadn't been for him, you wouldn't be feeling either." Kirk looked at Spock, but it wasn't thanks that was shining out of his eyes. Spock dropped his gaze, confused by Kirk's reaction.

"Come on," continued McCoy, "let's get you into a proper bed. Spock I'm going to need your help." They lifted Kirk from the water and Spock carefully helped him to a soft bed that McCoy had already prepared. Together they took off the environmental suit. "You won't need this anymore," said McCoy. "It was there so you wouldn't end up wrinkled like a prune."

"If you will excuse me, Doctor," said Spock, "I shall take my leave."

McCoy looked at Spock in surprise, then he started to notice the strain between Kirk and Spock. "Uh, sure," he said. "You need some sleep - doctor's orders."

Spock nodded slightly, looked briefly at Kirk, then left.

McCoy watched him go, then turned back to the Captain. He looked very pale and thin. He was still covered with bruises, but the colors were starting to fade, no longer the wicked purple/black of fresh injuries, but turning to the greenish-yellow of healing.

"Do you hurt anywhere in particular, Jim?"

"No."

McCoy's eyebrows rose slightly at the sharpness of Kirk's response. "Well, that's good. You'll be glad to know that the Klingons were stopped, and an interdiction put on Prandan 4. They won't be pulling that little stunt again." He eased some medical coveralls on Kirk. "Can you lie down comfortably?"

Kirk lay back, his breath catching slightly as his shoulders came in contact with the bed. McCoy carefully programmed the monitors. There was still some seepage from the torn muscles in Kirk's left shoulder.

"It must have been pretty rough down there," he said conversationally as he settled a sheet over Kirk.

He got no answer. Kirk shut his eyes, his breathing shuddering a little. McCoy stood looking at him with concern. Kirk was weakened by the hemophilia, but that wouldn't account for this attitude, nor explain why Spock had almost fled from the room. What had happened? What were they trying to hide? What were they refusing to face?



At first, Kirk didn't question anything McCoy did. He passively accepted it, spending most of his time gazing blankly at the ceiling. Gradually he started coming out of his lethargy, and began to notice how carefully he was being treated - and protected.

He waited until only McCoy was there. "Bones," he said quietly, "what's wrong with me?"

McCoy froze for a minute, wondering what on earth he could say, wondering how damaging the truth would be, but knowing he couldn't avoid answering. Kirk was healing, getting to the point where he would be demanding release from the Sickbay. For his own safety, he would have to know before then.

He looked at Kirk and decided it was best to hit him between the eyes with the truth. "For some reason, you've lost the Factor B, the clotting factor, in your blood. That's why you bruise so easily, why cuts bleed for so long, why you hurt so much."

Kirk lay silent for a long time. "What caused it?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

The hazel eyes shadowed a bit. "The thorns on Monet," he said quietly.

"The what?"

"Remember my left shoulder when I got back from R & R? I fell into a thorn bush. Spock would probably know what kind it was. That's when the bruises started..." His hand involuntarily touched his swollen shoulder as he

thought about what McCoy had said, then he suddenly looked at the doctor, his already pale face growing whiter. "My God, Bones, if my blood doesn't clot, are you saying I could bleed to death?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, that's an old wives' tale. We can inject the necessary clotting factor, but you'll have to be a bit more careful in what you do."

Kirk closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath, but didn't say anything more. McCoy hoped that maybe he would drift off to sleep. He sat down, not assured that Kirk would take this calmly. Time passed, then suddenly Kirk stiffened, and McCoy instantly knew Kirk's quick mind had made the connection between the old disease of the novels and this as yet unexplained malady.

"It's hemophilia, isn't it?" There was a slight tremor in Kirk's voice, fear that would never be expressed in any other way.

"Not exactly," said McCoy, desperately trying to think of something to say.

Kirk's eyes opened. "How 'not exactly', Doctor?" he asked harshly. "Don't try to con me, McCoy. I've read about this - historical accounts of the royal families back on Earth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - the bleeders. That's what I'm doing, isn't it? Bleeding?"

"Jim, hemophilia's a hereditary disease..."

"Apparently there are exceptions." Their gazes met, and McCoy's heart sank when he saw fear start to replace the anger in Kirk's eyes.



Spock was getting ready for bed when the door buzzer rang. He hesitated for a moment. It was very rare for someone to come to his quarters. There was only one person who normally would, but Spock knew Kirk was in Sickbay and didn't want to see him. He had not gone back there since Kirk regained consciousness, and would not until Kirk asked for him. McCoy kept him informed of Kirk's progress, obviously very curious about why Spock stayed away, but using more tact than was usual and not demanding to know.

He pulled on a long robe and activated the lock. His eyebrow rose when McCoy came in. "Problem, Spock," he said with no preliminary greeting. "Jim's gone."

Spock felt his heart start to thump. "Gone?"

McCoy nodded. "He detached his IV tubes and left Sickbay. No one saw him go. I've been to his quarters but he's not there."

"Have you alerted Security?"

McCoy shook his head. "I couldn't bring myself to do it. What do I say, 'The Captain's run away from Sickbay'?"

Spock frowned. "Do you have any idea why he would do such a thing?"

McCoy nodded again. "I told him what was wrong with him this afternoon. Spock, I don't know what's going on between the two of you, but can't you swallow your pride this once and go to him? If anyone knows where he is, you would. If anyone can break through and reach him, you can."

Spock's dark eyes shadowed. *It is not I who have to swallow pride, he thought to himself. He nodded slightly. "I shall try, Doctor." And possibly destroy everything these past months have healed.*

The herbarium was dark when Spock walked in. He stood just inside the door for a few seconds, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. Gradually he could make out the splashes of color from the various flowers and bushes. Then he noted that one of the viewscreens had been activated.

He quietly made his way to the other side of the large room. Kirk was curled up on one of the benches, his arms wrapped around his knees, his eyes fixed on the fast-moving stars. He was still dressed in the sleeveless Sickbay coveralls, and the mottled bruises on his shoulders and arms were standing in stark relief against the white material.

Spock stopped several feet away, unsure of what he should do, unsure of the reception Kirk would give him. "Jim?"

There was no movement, no acknowledgment from the figure on the bench. Even in the darkness Spock could see the reflection of the stars in the large hazel eyes. He stood uncertainly for a few more minutes, then he quietly sat down on the end of the bench.

"Jim, McCoy is very worried about you. Don't you think you should come back to the Sickbay?"

There was still no answer. Kirk continued to stare at the viewscreen. Spock was at a total loss about what to do.

Finally, Kirk turned to look at him. "You're alive."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Affirmative."

"Kapal said you were dead." Kirk turned back to the stars. In a soft, broken voice, he told Spock exactly what Kapal had said, words he would never forget for as long as he lived. As he spoke, Spock's hands balled into

fists, his knuckles whitened by his rage, although nothing touched his face.

When Kirk finally finished, they sat in silence for a long time. Spock could feel the wall starting to build, starting to cut him off from Kirk again. He couldn't bear to let it happen. He couldn't stand to have Kirk look at him again as he had in Sickbay. Summoning up every ounce of courage he had, he reached out his hand and touched Kirk.

"Jim, we shared something on Prandan, something I did not believe two people could share. Why are you running from me? What has happened?"

Kirk pulled away. "That person died back on Prandan."

Spock felt himself go cold. "Jim..."

Kirk got to his feet and moved away. "I broke, Spock," he said finally. "I begged them to let me talk. I begged them!"

Spock looked puzzled. "Jim, you couldn't have. Kapal cursed you to your hell because of your stubbornness, your defiance..."

"Damn it, I wasn't defiant! I was trying to talk, except I couldn't get anything out." He swung back to look at Spock. "Does that sound like a leader to you? Punch him in the stomach and listen to him tell you everything he knows?"

Spock sat still, his eyes on Kirk. "That's not the truth. You know now why their persuasion was so effective. Why don't you face the real reason for your feelings?"

"You're a fine one to tell me to face my feelings," said Kirk angrily.

"You are the one who taught me how."

For a moment Kirk stared at Spock, as though the Vulcan had just hit him, then he turned away again and stood for a long time looking out into the starry blackness of space. Finally he drew a shuddering breath. "Spock, three years ago we made a hell of a mistake. I had to learn how to be alone, and I did. Then, suddenly, you were back, and things were even better than they had been before." He walked to the viewscreen and touched the cool surface, his hand resting on the reflection of the Vulcan sitting behind him. "I can't bear to lose you again. The pain had little to do with me breaking, it was the thought of what they had done to you. Suddenly nothing mattered, just as nothing mattered that day you told me you were leaving." He turned back to Spock. "Being what I am, who I am, can I allow one person to affect my life like that? Is it fair to the lives and safety of everyone else under my command?"

Spock walked forward until he was face to face with Kirk. His hand reached out and touched Kirk's face. "In Sickbay, you were trying to deny what you had shown on Prandan. Do you still feel that same denial?"

"Do you?"

"Vulcans do not lie."

"No, but they can stretch the truth."

Spock smiled slightly. "Only when taught by an expert." He sobered. "My truth is that, had our positions been reversed, I would have broken, and for exactly the same reason. It is not logical, but it is true."

"It weakens us, Spock..."

The Vulcan shook his head. "No, it binds and strengthens the separate people we are."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Jim, come back to Sickbay. Let McCoy look after you. We will find a cure for the disease. Now is not the time to try to sort out emotional tangles. Will you do that much for me?"

Kirk turned back to the large starfield, then he nodded. He was too tired to keep fighting, and too scared to admit it.



"He says it was the thorns on Monet, Spock," said McCoy, peering over the Vulcan's shoulder so he could look at the computer readout. "That's when he started getting bruises."

"According to this, there are five species of thorn-bearing plants on that planet," said Spock, "none of which causes this type of reaction if embedded in Human flesh. However, I do remember his shoulder had a puffy, purplish swelling that afternoon, and he admitted he had pulled out a goodly number of thorns."

"Could we possibly go back there and get some to analyze?" said McCoy. "Maybe we could find something we're missing, using cold facts."

"I do not see why not, unless the Captain has an objection, since he will be back in command of the Enterprise." He saw McCoy start to open his mouth in protest. "Doctor, you told me that Captain Kirk is now suffering from classic hemophilia symptoms. I have done some research on the genetic disease. You've been worried about letting Jim go back on duty in case he hurts himself; but there is another element you have overlooked, if, indeed, his problem follows the same lines."

"Which is?"

"Emotion. Bleeding can be triggered by anger, anxiety, resentment - even embarrassment. All cause an increase in blood pressure, forcing an increased blood flow through the smallest blood vessels. Overwrought emotions could adversely affect the strength of the fragile capillary walls, causing them to break down. You cannot tell the Captain to stop feeling; it would be the same as trying to stop him from breathing. I suggest we could control him more easily if he returned to duty."

McCoy looked at him for a long time, then he nodded. "You're right. Much as I hate to let him go back to work, it's probably the best thing for him."

Kirk was rather amused at the way Spock followed him around the ship, making sure he didn't get into trouble. He complained very little until he had to go to the bathroom and he found Spock following him in. He managed to make the Vulcan blush a deep green when he observed with a chuckle that, ever since he was a little kid, he had always been able to do it on his own!

They were on their way back to Nonet. Neither Kirk nor Spock could remember exactly what the thorn bush looked like, and it was imperative to test the correct plant. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy were sitting in McCoy's office. The medical recorder was running as McCoy questioned Kirk closely concerning everything that had happened to him, trying to establish exactly what could have caused the hemophilia-like symptoms to develop.

McCoy frowned as he read the list. "Torn muscles in left shoulder from the fracas on Dimon, sonic treatment. Some kind of thorns embedded in the same shoulder, no remembered reaction, no treatment..."

"There was some swelling," said Spock, "but it soon went down."

"Some swelling," wrote McCoy. "All right, let's see... Hit same shoulder during workout in gym - sonic treatment again for severe bruising. There isn't anything here..."

"Wait a minute," said Kirk. "What about that thing we hit with the shuttle?"

"Thing?" echoed McCoy.

"A small band of radiation, Doctor," said Spock, "surrounding an asteroid shower, doubtless left over from a planet breakup and propelled on its present course by the force of that breakup."

"Radiation," said McCoy as he wrote it down. "That's not much help. Radiation doesn't cause hemophilia."

"No," said Kirk with a frown. "Guess it wasn't much help."

"Don't worry," said McCoy, sensing Kirk's growing depression. "The answer's bound to be right in front of our noses. We've just got to be smart enough to see it."

Spock looked at Kirk. "I remember a young captain once saying there was very little a starship couldn't do. The *Enterprise* won't let you down, Jim." Kirk looked at him, and Spock's heart ached at the expression in the hazel eyes.



"Now, let's see," said Kirk as they stood on the sandy beach, "you were down there, Spock, and I was running back up this way..." He grinned a little, remembering how Spock had so neatly turned things around and given him a dose of his own medicine.

"And this is where you fell backwards," said Spock. "There is the rock where you hit your shoulder..."

"Shoulder?"

"Don't panic, Bones, I survived."

"He survived," muttered McCoy. "Why on earth do I bother trying to practice my profession?"

"This is definitely my bush," said Kirk with satisfaction. "Okay, Doctor, clip away to your heart's content."

As McCoy and his men took samples from the thorn bush, Kirk and Spock wandered down the beach, back to the sheltered spot where they had made their camp. They walked in companionable silence, each remembering the talks they had had, and the peace they had shared.

"Looks like a good day for surfing," said Kirk wistfully as they watched the big waves break and come crashing down onto the shore. He left Spock and walked farther on, staring down at the golden grains of sand sparkling in the sunlight.

Spock saw the huge wave, far bigger than the rest, come arching in high over the beach where McCoy and his men were working. It was obvious there had been a volcanic eruption deep within the ocean which had whipped the water to a frenzy.

"McCoy, look out!" Spock was already flying down the beach as Kirk looked up. His Starfleet training had given him quick reflexes, and he was close on Spock's heels. McCoy and two of his men managed to scramble out of the way. Spock grabbed the third one and threw him to safety, but, unbalanced, there was nothing he could do to save himself. The heavy weight of the water knocked him flat, and the tremendous undertow dragged him out.

"Spock!" Kirk didn't hesitate, but dove straight in after the Vulcan through the next big wave, oblivious to

the cries from McCoy. He took a deep breath and went straight down, not fighting the rushing water but letting it take him, as it would surely be taking Spock. He knew how to combat the strength of an ocean's waves; Spock did not.

His body was taking a tremendous beating, but he kept groping, feeling. When he occasionally broke free of the pounding water, he gulped great lungfuls of air, then dove again.

Finally he found Spock, close to the bottom. He grabbed him hard, locking both arms around the Vulcan's limp body. He spent a couple of seconds letting the undertow drag him so he knew which way the shore was, then he shot up for the surface. He let the waves carry them to the shore where McCoy and his men were waiting. He and Spock were upended and dunked twice, but they finally made it.

They were pulled far up the beach, McCoy grumbling all the way to cover his fear. "You blasted fool, of all the stupid, idiotic things to do! There were other people here who could have..."

"Is Spock all right?" Kirk pushed himself up on one elbow and looked at Spock's prone figure.

"He's going to be fine, sir," said one of McCoy's assistants as he pumped water out of the Vulcan's lungs. "Looks like he just got a bump on the head."

Kirk lay back, feeling limp with relief. "How am I, Bones?" he asked quietly.

"A mess," said McCoy bitterly. "A damned, bleeding mess."

★

McCoy met Spock at the entrance of the intensive care unit. "I just heard," said Spock. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were battered and needed sleep..."

"You said that by injecting thrombin into Kirk's system that this wouldn't happen."

McCoy felt his anger rise. "Not when he's taken on the force of an entire ocean! His body can't produce what he needs and cope with the severity of his knee injury. Spock," he said, putting his hand on the Vulcan's arm, "be ready for what you're about to see. The pain of a bleeding joint is one of the worst known to medical science. I can't even make Jim comfortable at this point." He couldn't continue to look at Spock's stricken face. "Just wanted you to be prepared. He's in bad shape, and I don't want anyone in there who is going to over-react."

"Doctor," said Spock coldly, "a Vulcan does not over-react."

Nevertheless, Spock was grateful that McCoy had warned him. Kirk was lying on his back, propped up by huge, soft pillows. His left leg was elevated under the knee, which was badly swollen and discolored. He was dressed in a white wrap-around tunic that stopped well above his knees, so that there was nothing touching the injured leg.

Kirk's face was pale and damp from renewed shock and pain. His arms lay at his sides, his hands twisted in the sheet he was lying on as he struggled with pain that drugs could only barely control. Spock could see additional bruises on Kirk's neck and shoulders, reminders of the tremendous buffeting they had both received from the waves.

Slowly Spock walked forward. "Jim?"

Kirk opened his eyes and Spock saw that they were bright with unshed tears, tears caused by the unrelenting pain. "Morning," he said with the ghost of a smile. He glanced down at his leg. "Didn't reinjure my shoulder this time."

"You shouldn't have injured anything..." began Spock.

"It won't work, Spock," said Kirk softly. "Remember what you said to me about positions being reversed? You just blew your 'logical' argument."

Spock looked at Kirk and nodded slightly, then straightened his shoulders a little. "I'll find the answer," he said, his voice holding a determined promise.

★

The answers kept eluding them. From the first, the department heads of the science and medical sections knew they were in for a rough siege. The medical services had been working on the problem since the first blood tests that McCoy had taken, and had come up with nothing. But they knew the Vulcan wouldn't quit until an answer was found - even if there wasn't an answer.

McCoy put a tray down beside Spock. "You need food," he said finally when Spock continued to ignore him. "Get your nose out of that slide and eat!"

McCoy couldn't remember ever seeing Spock look so tired. The brown eyes were blurred with exhaustion as the Vulcan finally leaned back and looked at him.

"Come on, Spock, you're not Superman," he said softly. "Take a break."

Spock glanced at the food, then back at the tissue sample on the slide. Finally he sighed and stood up. "Very well, Doctor." He picked up the tray and moved over to an empty table.

McCoy stood watching for a few minutes, then shook his head in exasperation. "Try putting some of it in your

mouth!"

Spock looked startled, then flushed slightly as he realized he had been simply toying with the food. Quickly, he began to eat.

The doctor leaned against the desk Spock had been working at. "Find anything useful?" he asked hopefully.

Spock shook his head. "Only the cause. The lamytra poison in the thorns got into Jim's system through the torn muscles in his shoulder. The poison combined with the intense radiation we encountered on our way back from Nonet, setting up a chain of mutant molecules that broke down the coagulation mechanism."

McCoy frowned. "Well, there's a treatment for radiation - lamytra poison's not lethal, but there is a sensitivity antidote. A combination...?"

Spock shook his head again. "We tried. The two antidotes combine to develop a strong poison, guaranteed to kill."

"Ouch," said McCoy. He glanced at the computer. "You'd think with all this blasted technology we would be able to deal with something like this." He started toward the door. "I'd better get back to Jim. He's putting up a good front, but he's hurting, and he's scared." He looked at Spock. "Find something soon, okay?"

For a moment Spock sat looking at the closed door, then he left his barely touched food and went back to work.



"Well, Jim-boy, it looks like this ice can come off."

"That's a relief," said Kirk with a slight smile. "I wasn't sure if my knee was blue because of the bruising or the blasted cold." He paused for a minute. "The bleeding's completely stopped?"

McCoy nodded. "According to this panel, it has." He reached out his hand, only to have Kirk recoil at the thought of his knee being touched. "That bad?" asked McCoy softly.

"I'm not sure I want to find out," said Kirk. "I think I'm turning into a coward in my old age."

"Yeah, sure," said McCoy drily. "Well, I've got a couple of things I need to do. You okay?"

Kirk nodded. "I feel better now, knowing that the bleeding's stopped. Go ahead, Bones. I can amuse myself for a while."

McCoy headed back for the biochemistry lab to check on Spock. In his opinion, the Vulcan was in almost worse shape than Kirk. He walked in quietly, being careful not to disturb Spock.

The Vulcan was rapidly feeding figures into the computer and exchanging information through an open line to biogenetics. He appeared to be arguing about something, but it was in terms McCoy didn't understand. He had never been much interested in the mathematics of his profession.

"It doesn't balance," Spock said finally.

"Try a negative factor," came the voice over the intercom.

Again Spock's fingers flew over the computer controls, then he sat looking at the results. "Firming at +24," he said. "Do you concur?"

"Affirmative. What do you think?"

"We go with it. Bring the serum to Sickbay as soon as you can. I'll tell McCoy. Spock out."

"You'll tell me what?"

Spock actually jumped. He'd had no idea McCoy was there. It said a lot about his tension and exhaustion.

"Jim's no longer bleeding," said McCoy hurriedly, "and I needed to stare at a different set of walls for a while. Did you find something?"

"I believe so, Doctor. We've developed a promising drug that should destroy the mutant molecules. Then, theoretically, the normal clotting mechanism will start again."

"How did you manage to test it?"

"We haven't..."

"Spock, you're not going to use Jim as a test case?"

"Do we have any choice? Does he have time to spare while we spend the required months or years testing it? What would he insist on if we asked him?"

"Blast it, it's his life we're talking about!"

"It was his decision to be injected with a massive dose of adrenalin that time at Gamma Hydra IV when none of us knew it would work. Would you deny him now?"

McCoy looked at Spock. "I can't sanction it."

Spock's dark eyes never wavered. "Shall we ask the Captain?"



The thin, clear liquid of the antidote dripped into Kirk's arm. The minutes passed into hours, the hours into days. During that time they could do nothing but wait, eyes glued to the monitors. Gradually, wobbly clots started

forming, then broke off as the pressure of blood-filled tissues pushed them out of place. Time kept ticking on.

"I think it is working, Doctor," said Spock quietly. McCoy dragged open eyes that felt full of grit and looked at the panel. The mutant molecules had been destroyed - the hemophilia had been stopped.

Kirk's eyes opened at Spock's gentle touch. "We won, Jim," he said softly.

Kirk looked from Spock to McCoy. "It's over?"

McCoy shook his head. "Not quite. Your left knee is badly swollen and I don't dare try to drain it with an airpack just yet. It's received too much abuse. It must be given time to heal and strengthen."

Spock nodded. "We have solved only one problem."

"The pain," said Kirk, for the first time admitting it was getting the better of him. "Will it subside?"

McCoy shook his head again. "Not for a while. I've been giving you morphine at a maximum dose for too long already. Now that the hemophilia's been stopped, I'm going to have to cut back on the dosage."

Spock saw a look close to panic cross Kirk's face. Softly, his fingers brushed across the entry points of the weld. This again he could do - he could take some of the pain away. He glanced up at McCoy. "Doctor, why don't you try to get some sleep? I will stay with Jim."

"Spock, you haven't slept for days!"

"And I do not yet need to. Please, you must be alert to help him. Do it for his sake, if not your own." It was logic McCoy could not argue with. Within minutes he was dead to the world.



"Come on, Bones, you promised that you would come with us on our next R & R; 'no matter how horrendous a time you had planned' is how, I believe, you put it."

McCoy firmly shook his head. "You can't tell me, Jim, that Vulcan fits anyone's description of R & R. I'd be happier trekking across the Gobi Desert back on Earth!" He handed Kirk his crutches, then adjusted the brace on his left leg. "Be sure to check that carefully every day, and tighten it as the swelling goes down. And don't dare take it off! No swimming, no showers with water - just good old sonics, okay?"

"Yes, Mommy," said Kirk with a grin.

McCoy snorted as Spock walked in. He was dressed in the soft desert garb of Vulcan, as was Kirk. "Are you ready, Jim?"

"Anytime," said Kirk. "Did you get all the last minute instructions that I did?"

"Affirmative," said Spock, taking a long list out of his pocket. "I very much doubt that the good doctor left anything out."

"Well, it's your own fault," said McCoy. "If you two wouldn't batter yourselves so badly..."

"Then why don't you come with us, Bones? That way you could keep us out of trouble."

"Fat chance, and I'm not going to Vulcan!" He looked at Spock. "It would be different if your parents were there, but from what Jim tells me, you're not going anywhere near ShiKahr."

"No," said Spock, "we are not." McCoy looked at him for a moment, wondering why they both seemed reluctant to say where they were going.

Kirk glanced at the chronometer. "Well, we'd best get a move on if we're going to be in the transporter room at the right time. I'm not exactly fleet of foot at the moment."



They materialized on a high plateau, hot winds whipping sand past their faces. Large, rocky formations rose high into the red Vulcan sky. Spock touched Kirk's arm and they slowly made their way to a cave that had been hollowed out centuries earlier by a raging torrent that had long since been forgotten.

"The home of an acolyte in Gol," said Spock as he shook out the padded sleeping bag. He laid it out and then helped Kirk down, carefully placing his crutches so they were within easy reach.

"Yours, I suppose," said Kirk.

Spock nodded. "Except at night in my deepest dreams, when it would become my quarters on the *Enterprise*, and I would sail the stars with her - and with you."

Kirk smiled slightly. "I appreciate you bringing me here. Perhaps I will be able to understand a little better what it is that forced you, that drives you now."

Spock knelt in front of him. "I told you on Prandan."

Kirk shook his head. "I bared my soul on Prandan, Spock. You saw me stripped of everything. I couldn't see you, not clearly. But I have those memories, and your words. Perhaps being here on Gol will cement them into reality." He reached out and touched Spock's face. "I hope so, anyway."

Spock lightly touched Kirk's hand, then rose. "I must go and pay my respects to the Masters. They will understand why you do not accompany me. I will not be gone long. There is water here, and some food."

"Thanks, but I'll wait for you to get back." Kirk sat for a while in the cave, letting the peace of the high plateau fill his being. He could well understand the reasons why Spock would come here when he could no longer deal with the tremendous emotions of his double heritage.

Finally he decided to get up and look around a bit. However, he had never tried to get up off the floor with his leg in a brace which went from his hip to his ankle. He felt like a fish flopping out of water.

Suddenly he was aware of a hand reaching out. Looking up, he saw a Vulcan woman in a long white robe standing in front of him, a soft hood not quite covering the delicately pointed ears. She was watching him with keen eyes from a face so serene that it made Kirk's heart ache to look at her.

"May I be of assistance, Captain?"

Kirk flushed, but there was no way he was going to be able to get up on his own. "Thank you, I would appreciate it." He held out a hand and was gently lifted to his feet.

"It is a strong man who will accept help when needed, Captain," said the woman as she gently released him. "I am T'Sai, High Master of Gol."

Kirk felt like an idiot standing there while T'Sai got his crutches. He thanked her again and felt much better when he could balance on his own. "It is very kind of you to let us come to Gol," he said. "I understand from Spock that it is a rare honor for outworlders..."

T'Sai smiled. "'Outworlders' do not exist at Gol, Captain. To be considered an outworlder is to have negative emotion placed against you. There is no emotion here."

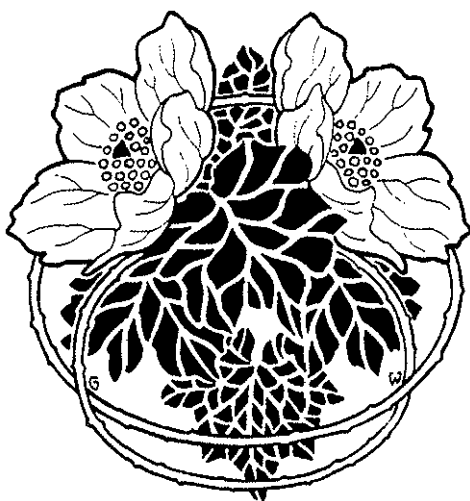
"Is that why you sent Spock back?"

The dark eyes studied him for a long moment. "All of nature has a pattern, Captain. Where there is sun, there is always a shadow. The sun creates a living shadow. When Spock was with us as an acolyte, he had no sun. He had no sun. One cannot exist for long without the sun..."

"And the sun is no friend of the dead," said Kirk quietly.

T'Sai nodded. "You understand a great deal, Captain Kirk. I sensed this from my contact with Spock. When he requested to bring you here, I consented because I wanted to meet this person who understood at so early an age what many never learn, even after years of trying." She stepped back. "Spock will be returning soon. Continue to live your lives in truth. Continue to be who you are." She raised her hand in the Vulcan salute and was gone.

Kirk made his way to the entrance of the cave. In the distance he could see Spock walking toward him. T'Sai had given him the answer concerning Spock's importance in his life. Had he not lost his own sun during the years Spock was gone? T'Sai saw that this truth held for him just as much as it had for Spock. *The sun creates a living shadow, and neither of them lived as a whole person without the other. Where there is sun, there is always a shadow.* Kirk took a deep breath. He hoped it would always be true.





When There Are No Answers



MEMO:

To: Admiral James T. Kirk, commanding, U.S.S. Enterprise

From: Admiral Mark Pare, Chief of Operations, Starfleet Command

Dear Jim,

Sorry to heap yet another problem onto your shoulders, but Nogura's shaking things up around here and I badly need advice. He's set up a review board to investigate the recent accidents aboard cadet training ships, and he's after my butt to come up with guidelines for revamping cadet instruction after leaving the Academy. You've worked with kids aboard the Enterprise and you've had the pleasure of doing this job. Any useful suggestions concerning any of the above?

Cheers,

Mark

Kirk put the memo down on the desk in his Starfleet office with a weary sigh, trying not to notice the slight tremor in his hand, a sure sign he was tired. He rubbed his aching head, cursing for the thousandth time the fractured skull that had flattened him months earlier. The injury still made its presence felt whenever he pushed himself too hard, making him feel older than his years, occasionally making him wonder if he was still capable of doing the things a young, idealistic Kirk had once done.

He picked up some reports and started to scan them before stuffing them into his briefcase. However, he was not really seeing them, but the faces of the young crewmen who had served under him during the past ten years - and the unlucky ones who would serve no more. Nogura's demands were long overdue; there had been too much unnecessary death. The training system should have been overhauled years before.

"Have you ever heard of a normal eight-hour working day, Admiral?" Kirk glanced up to see McCoy standing in the doorway of his office, then looked at the chronometer on his desk. He frowned slightly as he saw what time it was. McCoy had been breathing down his neck for weeks now about working too hard; too many hours with no break, no days off.

"Bones, I've told you before that I've got to get all this stuff organized if..."

"Bull!" said McCoy shortly as he walked into Kirk's office. "What about the Enterprise...?"

"She's in spacedock..."

"At the moment, and stop interrupting," McCoy pulled a pile of papers toward him. "I'm not a line officer, but that looks suspiciously like a Fleet organization." He looked up at Kirk. "Why won't you let Pare do the job he's being paid to do?"

"It's a big job for one man..."

"You did it - but that's your style, isn't it? You wouldn't accept help from anyone."

Kirk's eyes darkened. "Is this conversation going to lead somewhere, Doctor?"

McCoy shoved the papers back at Kirk. "I hope so." He sat down opposite Kirk. "Jim, I used to throw

efficiency ratings at you when nothing else worked. Even Spock used them to get you to slow down..." His clear eyes scanned Kirk's face. "What's driving you? I can understand the tensions of command, but it seems more than that..."

Kirk leaned back in his chair, his eyes holding McCoy's steadily, but he made no comment.

McCoy sighed. "You are doing the work of three men, Admiral. When are you going to realize that the huge machine we know as Starfleet isn't solely dependent on you?" He fell silent for a moment. "What is it, Jim? You're acting like a fledgling ensign who's suddenly realized how far it is to the top...but you're at the top. You are the man everyone wants to be..." He looked more closely at Kirk. "Is that the answer?"

Kirk got to his feet, gathering the papers together. "We've been through this argument too many times recently." He looked up at McCoy. "I've always worked like this; why are you picking on me now? I've always been an overachiever; why is it suddenly so wrong?" He stuffed the papers into an already bulging briefcase, then straightened up. "Well, am I going to get a straight answer for a change, or just more blustering?"

McCoy slowly got to his feet. "All right, if you want it straight between the eyes. Your latest physical, for one thing."

"Which showed what?"

"Not much, except for the fact that you still show the after-effects of that skull fracture that almost effectively ended your life, plus you've been working at a pace that would exhaust a twenty-year-old. You're not twenty, you know."

Kirk paused for a moment, startled that McCoy was pursuing the same thoughts that had been going through his own mind just moments before. "A man is only as old as he feels, Doctor," he said finally.

"And a man can age himself prematurely by burning himself out. Jim, you are a flesh-and-blood human being and one I happen to care about very much. Stop listening to the hype about the legendary dragon-slayer..."

"Who is a legendary dragon-slayer, Doctor?" Spock's voice came from behind McCoy. As absorbed as they had been in their argument, neither man had noticed the Vulcan entering.

"St. George here," muttered McCoy.

Spock looked at Kirk, puzzlement showing in his brown eyes. "St. George?"

"Don't worry," said Kirk, "it's just McCoy's senility setting in. Come on, let's get some dinner. Oh, did you manage to get hold of that report?"

"Report?" asked McCoy suspiciously.

"You wouldn't be interested," said Kirk. "Come on, Spock..." He was brought up short by McCoy physically blocking the door.

"Admiral, when you were first promoted to flag rank you asked me to be your personal physician, and I refused. Rather than see you dragged down and destroyed, I ran. I ran from Starfleet and I ran from you. Then, in a rare moment of open honesty, you held out your hand and asked for help. I promised myself right then and there that I'd never turn from you again, and I'm not about to now."

"I'm not asking for your help now."

"But you're going to get it!" McCoy held out his hand. "Are you going to give me that briefcase?"

Kirk suddenly understood, even if he couldn't see McCoy's reasoning, that he had come up against an immovable force. He looked down at the briefcase, then handed it over. McCoy took it, then looked at Spock. "The report, sir." Spock looked at Kirk.

"You might as well give it to him, Spock, before he wrestles you to the floor in order to get it."

McCoy nodded in satisfaction as Spock handed over the report. "Good! I'm glad that's cleared up. Now, I've made reservations for three at *The Captain's Table*, my treat."

"Bones, you are impossible to figure out!" said Kirk, his anger only partially feigned.

"Just part of my ongoing therapy, Admiral," said McCoy with a grin. "Eating properly, that is." He looked at Kirk's slim figure. "You worry me when you aren't on one of my diets."

"I give up," said Kirk with a laugh. "Come on, let's get a good meal and maybe talk this out sensibly." He led the way out of the room, missing the meaningful look that passed between Spock and McCoy. It was not only the doctor who was worried about Kirk.



Their meal was over and Kirk was silently nursing an after-dinner drink when McCoy's voice filtered into his thoughts. "Okay, Jim, you've had a break..." McCoy waited until Kirk's eyes had come back to full focus before he continued, "so I'm going to repeat my earlier question. What's driving you?"

Kirk fingered the glass in his hand, then sighed softly. "I hate the pressures of being planetside. You're always being asked to help out and you just get one thing going smoothly when you're dragged away to something

else."

"I do not believe Starfleet feels you must spend all your time at Headquarters while the *Enterprise* is being serviced and refitted, Jim," said Spock, his dark eyes intently fixed on Kirk's face. "You do not appear to be able to say no to anyone."

Kirk's eyes darkened in momentary anger, then he smiled. "How do you let go, Spock? How can you allow so much foolish incompetence to go unchecked?" He took a swallow of brandy, then put the glass down on the table. "Has it always been like this? How blind was I as a cadet? Back then everything seemed so perfect, and I was killing myself living up to standards that I now know never existed." He shook his head. "I want nothing more than to get the hell out of here, get back to the *Enterprise*, and get as far away from Starfleet as possible."

"Will that really help, Jim?"

Kirk looked at McCoy. "You bet. The *Enterprise* has a solid reputation, Doctor, and do you know why? Because every person on that ship is competent in his job. There are a half-dozen who would make excellent commanders and teachers in their own right."

"Have you ever wondered why they don't go for command?" asked McCoy. "Could it be that they would rather stay with you?"

"Chekov didn't."

"Do you miss him?"

Kirk turned astonished eyes on Spock, not really believing he had heard correctly, then he burst out laughing. "Did he irritate you that much?"

"No more than he did you."

"Okay, okay," said McCoy laughing, "we're getting off the subject." He looked at Kirk. "How about taking some R & R before the *Enterprise* is due to leave?"

Kirk smiled. "You've made the observation many times that I'm hard to get along with when I'm not working."

McCoy looked at him thoughtfully. "You've been out there in space almost continuously since you left the Academy, Jim. You've commanded two missions and are planning a third..."

"So?"

"As I said earlier, you're not twenty anymore."

"I'm the same age as some of those first astronauts who went into space. Hell, the first Orbitor - what was it, the *Columbia* - was piloted by a man who was fifty. I'm hardly there yet." His eyes narrowed. "What are you getting at, Bones?"

"You almost died from a crushed skull a while back. You were unconscious for six weeks, then you leaped to your feet and went straight back on duty."

"Now, Bones, I hardly did that."

"Jim, you..."

"You were the one who certified me as being fit..."

"Will you stop butting in and let me make my point? You haven't had a day off in the last four months."

"I haven't had time."

"Don't give me that nonsense! You're too busy trying to run Starfleet single-handed and complaining every step of the way. Your last physical showed you probably couldn't fight your way out of a wet paper bag."

"I'm not planning on fighting a wet paper bag." Kirk's voice was joking but the hazel eyes had grown hard.

"You can't take the *Enterprise* out," said McCoy flatly. "If you were still Chief of Operations you wouldn't let a person with your medical file on duty, much less be in command of anything. For god's sake, man, admit you're human and slow down!"

Kirk's eyes were like ice, but McCoy was probably the only man in Starfleet who could match him stare for stare and not eventually back down. "Just what do you suggest?"

"Heavens, I'm not about to tell you what you'd like to do on R & R. All I'm suggesting is that you take some, starting immediately."

"I'll give your suggestion due consideration, Doctor," said Kirk as he got to his feet. "Goodnight, gentlemen."

Spock and McCoy sat silent for a few minutes, then Spock slowly got to his feet. "The captain is always at his most difficult when he is exhausted, yet he rarely seems to realize it."

McCoy smiled at Spock's unconscious use of the word *captain*. Since Kirk's latest promotion, never once had McCoy heard Spock use the word *captain* when referring to Kirk. At all times he made correct use of the title of admiral, a title Kirk had grown to dislike heartily. This slip showed the depths of Spock's concern for his friend.

"He'll come around, Spock. He still gets frustrated by the slow recovery he's making from that head injury."

He tends to tire easily, and that often affects his motor coordination. He's not used to having his body place restrictions on him. We'll just have to keep chipping away at that stubborn pride of his until he sees reason." He looked more closely at the Vulcan. "Come to think of it, you haven't had any R & R since you and Jim were on Crula."

"It is..."

"Not a necessity for you, I know," said McCoy with a groan. "Believe me, I'm not about to argue with you. Come on, it's been a long day. Let's head for home."



The soft lights came on as Kirk stepped through the door of his apartment. He paused to pick up a tape which had been left in the mail chute, then walked into the living room. He dropped into a chair and leaned his head back. He felt totally exhausted. McCoy had hit very near the mark this time. Kirk knew he was close to being unfit for duty, but was scared to admit it, even to himself. The *Enterprise* was his life, his reason for being. If McCoy certified him unfit for duty, he would lose her - probably for good - and that was something he couldn't face.

He took a shuddering breath. It wasn't the fear of losing his ship that was draining him; it was also the constant flood of people who were after him for so many reasons. He rested an arm across his eyes, trying to block the painful memories that flooded in. There had been too much hurt; Gary, Lenore, Edith, Miramanee - people who had looked on him as a friend, and often more...a lover, their salvation, a god. So often circumstances had forced him to use them, and he had ultimately failed every one of them.

Because of that hurt, he eventually found he could no longer bear to open himself to anyone. Now he was running from people, from commitment to people. On the *Enterprise* his command position forced him to be aloof, apart from others. He could be himself with only a few people, and they were people of his own choice. Here on Earth he did not have that protection of isolation. Here, even the lowly ensign vied for his attention until he felt hemmed in, out of control, and he intensely disliked the sensation.

The forgotten tape clattered out of his hand and fell to the floor. He leaned over and picked it up, noticing for the first time where it had originated - Iowa. He frowned slightly. There was only one person left there, now that his mother was dead. She had died when he was far out on his last patrol and he had been unable to make it back for the funeral. Since this latest return to Earth, he had made many excuses to himself for not going back.

He fiddled with the tape for a few minutes, then decided he would help nothing by putting off listening to it. He slipped it into the viewer and turned it on. The image of the serious young man who appeared on the screen made Kirk start. Except for the reddish hair, the gawky boy he had last seen more years ago than he cared to remember could have been the older brother he had always desperately wanted to love, but had never managed to know.

"It runs in the family, doesn't it?" he whispered. "I wanted to love you, Sam. Peter wants to love me but I won't let him, the same way you wouldn't let me. God, how we're capable of hurting each other!"

Peter's voice came on, an uncertain smile touching his face. "Uncle Jim, I hope this finds you still on Earth and not halfway across the galaxy 'tilting at windmills', as Gran so quaintly put it." He swallowed visibly, then continued. "If you are, I'd like to invite you and Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy - I'm sure they're there if you are - to my wedding." A blush accompanied the smile. "Yup, you heard right. One of the Kirk family has got to keep the line going, and you seem confirmed in your lifestyle, so it's up to me. Besides, I've met someone I can't live without." He ran a hand through his hair. "I know you hate this sort of thing, but it would mean an awful lot to me if you'd come. At least think about it? You know where I am, and I'm not going anywhere, at least not until the honeymoon - which, by the way, is something I'd like to talk about with you." He fell silent for a moment. "Well, I guess I've dropped enough of a bomb for one communication. Let me know if you can come?" The tape faded out, Peter as usual not knowing how to address this man he didn't know, yet somehow loved.

Dawn was cracking in the eastern sky when Kirk finally stood up. Memories long forgotten had been his companions through the silent hours of the night. He had not been aware of time passing as he sat staring into the distant blackness. Things he had deliberately pushed to the back of his mind had demanded his attention, and he had relived the life of an Iowa farmboy - a lonely boy, a lonely cadet, a lonely commander. *I have been given so much in my life*, he thought. *Can I honestly say I've given anything back? I owe so much to so many people...*

He walked into the kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee, then wandered back out into the living room. He stood looking at the communications panel, then reached forward and contacted Starfleet. "This is Admiral Kirk. I won't be coming in today. When Commander Spock and Dr. McCoy arrive, would you tell them I'd like to see them here at their convenience?"

"Aye, sir," came the cheerful response.

Kirk smiled as he shut off the communicator. He would take a long, hot shower, then sleep forever.

"I don't believe it! Peter's getting married?" McCoy was grinning from ear to ear as he watched the tape. "Well, Jim-boy, of course we're going!"

"I thought we might."

McCoy shot a quick look at Spock, who was standing impassively across the room, then he looked back at Kirk. "You'll have to take time off work."

"Better than that, Bones; I've already quit. Talked to Nogura this morning. I'm off until the *Enterprise* is ready to go again."

"I don't believe it! Is this the same person I fought with last night?" asked McCoy.

"Maybe not. I did a lot of thinking after I got home."

"And?"

"Not yet," said Kirk. "I've still got things to sort out."

"Fair enough," said McCoy with a quiet feeling of satisfaction. "When are we going?"

"I'll call Peter this afternoon and see when this fiasco is scheduled. I'll let you know."

"Great! Come on, Spock - unlike our leader here, we're still officially working. Let's go and rectify that."

"Very well, Doctor," said Spock, his eyes never leaving Kirk's face. McCoy missed it and bustled out the door.

"Hey, I'm all right," said Kirk, knowing what was on Spock's mind. "Ever since we returned from this last mission I know you've been after me to relax, to stop trying to prove I'm more than I am. Maybe it's finally beginning to sink in."

Spock's features softened slightly. How little this man would admit about his ability to feel and share. The only standard Kirk allowed himself was perfection. He chided those who pushed themselves too hard, yet couldn't do the same for himself. Spock had followed those same dictates for many years before he finally faced the fact that he couldn't, and shouldn't, change what he was. Maybe, finally, Kirk was finding that he could allow himself to be a simple human being.

"Hey, Spock, you coming?" McCoy's voice from the doorway broke the mood.

"Go on, Spock. I'll call you after I've talked to Peter. Oh, be sure to pack your hiking boots!" he called out as Spock headed for the door.

"Hiking boots?"

Spock was grateful his own astonishment didn't mirror what was on McCoy's face. "Hiking boots," he said firmly as he steered McCoy down the hall to the elevator.



"I like your uncle, Peter. He's not at all what I would expect a Starfleet admiral to be. He could charm the birds out of the trees!"

"I think he's done just that a number of times, Tess," said Peter Kirk with a laugh. "I'm really glad he came."

"You sound as though you thought he might not."

Peter grinned sheepishly. "I don't know what I thought. I haven't seen him since he brought me home fifteen years ago." He looked off into the distance. "He charms people, Tess, but he never lets anyone get close. I think the only people who really know him are Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy."

"He sounds like a lonely man."

"Lonely? No, I doubt if that would quite describe him. A person is lonely when he has no one to whom he can reach out. Uncle Jim could reach out to half the universe and be welcome. The difference is he won't let himself."

"I thought you didn't know him."

"I'm quoting Gran..." Approaching voices interrupted him. Kirk and McCoy appeared out of the dusky twilight.

"Oops," said McCoy. "I believe we arrived just where we're not wanted."

"Nonsense, Dr. McCoy," said Tess, "you're family now, or maybe I'm family now. How did those vows go, Peter?"

"You promised to support me for life," said Peter solemnly.

"If you're going to include me as family, then you'd better start calling me Uncle Len," said McCoy. "It makes me feel creaky being called Dr. McCoy by such a beautiful young lady."

"Now wait a minute," said Kirk in mock indignation. "I call you Dr. McCoy!"

"You're not a beautiful young lady."

Tess giggled at their conversation. "It's a little overwhelming for a poor orphan like me to suddenly have a husband and all sorts of uncles..."

"Hold it," said Kirk. "Dr. McCoy may be your uncle, I'm just plain Jim."

Tess looked at him, at the clear, practically unlined face with the laughing hazel eyes, and her heart melted. It was easy to see why so many people would care about his man. What was it Peter had said, that half the universe would welcome him? "Thank you," she said finally. "I like just plain Jim." She saw his eyes darken as though a light had been switched off, and she remembered something else Peter had said. Although half the universe would reach out to him, he would no longer reach back.

"Well, since this wild bash you're throwing seems to be turning into an all-night party, I'm going to take a break for an hour or so," said Kirk, missing the sharp look McCoy gave him. He gently put his hands on each side of Tess's face and kissed her on the forehead. "Welcome to the family, Tess. Peter had truly done us proud." He gave Peter a clap on the shoulder, then walked off into the gathering darkness.

"I wonder if he realizes there are only two of this particular branch of the Kirk family left?" said Peter quietly, causing McCoy to turn his stare from Kirk to him.

"Three," said Tess sternly, "and that number will grow quicky if I have any say in the matter."

Peter visibly blushed, even in the twilight. "Well, I guess we should get back to the party, seeing that we're the guests of honor. Coming, Dr. McCoy?"

"Uncle Len, dummy," said Tess as she slipped a hand under McCoy's arm, "and of course he's coming!"

The harvest moon was peeking over the horizon as Kirk came to the old-fashioned iron love seat at the end of the yard. He eased himself down, then leaned back and watched the moon as it rose in its solitary splendor, its pale light accenting the carefully laid-out garden surrounding him. Although he would never admit it to McCoy, he still had little stamina, and when he got tired he found it hard to control his emotions, something he had always been able to do in the past.

There were a lot of memories here, a lot of good memories - and a few painful ones. It was partly because of those memories that he had wanted to get away from the others for a while, to be by himself, to have time with people who were no longer there.

Spock stopped at the edge of the house. He could see Kirk sitting by himself and wondered if his presence would be considered an intrusion. However, his understanding of Kirk's needs drew him forward.

"I was wondering when you'd come," said Kirk quietly.

"I do not mean to intrude."

"You're not. Come and sit down." Spock moved forward and sat down beside Kirk. They watched in silence while the rising moon brought everything into sharper focus. "Dad and I spent a lot of time out here," said Kirk finally. "I learned about the stars from him."

"I am sorry I never had a chance to meet him," said Spock.

"You would have liked him." He fell silent and Spock looked at him, sure there was something bothering Kirk, but not sure how to go about asking. Finally Kirk opened up. "I wish I hadn't come back, Spock. I wanted to remember home as I once knew it, not like it is now with everyone I loved gone..."

Spock didn't know how to answer. "Jim, you are tired..."

"Yes, I'm tired," agreed Kirk, but in a tone that warned Spock he was treading on private ground. "I talked to Peter earlier," he said, obviously changing the subject. "His university class is going on a research project to Kadar. He wants us to go along."

Spock paused for a moment as he recalled what he knew about Kadar. "I believe an old civilization has recently been discovered there," he said.

Kirk nodded. "Sam's nose was always buried in a microscope, his son's is buried under a rock." He shook his head. "A full professor at twenty-five. That's going some."

"You taught at the Academy when you were not much more than twenty."

"I'm no longer twenty, which McCoy seems to be taking great delight in reminding me of recently." He looked at Spock. "Would you take thirty-two students, an odd assortment of interested persons, and the entire university archaeology staff on your honeymoon?"

"Unknown; I have never been on a honeymoon."

"Well, the average person wouldn't."

"Are we going?"

"Where?"

"On the honeymoon."

Kirk laughed at Spock's choice of words. "I don't know. What do you think?"

"To research something new is always of interest. I believe Kadar has an agreeable climate. There are worse places to be. Considering the fact that Dr. McCoy is close to tying us down on a sandy beach somewhere to insure the fact that we actually do rest, this might be an acceptable way to fulfill his wishes and not become bored out

of our minds while doing it."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Kirk with a grin, "but I wasn't sure how it would hit you."

"It hits me favorable," said Spock with a slight smile. "Shall we pose the question to Dr. McCoy and discover what his reaction is?"

As Spock started back toward the party, he noticed that Kirk was hanging behind, looking across at the small cemetery that held the family's graves. He frowned. He had seen the eagerness in Peter's face each time he looked at Kirk, and, with dismay, had seen Kirk draw away, just as he seemed to draw away from everybody. Why, Jim? he wondered. It's been years since I've seen you respond to anyone unless it was absolutely necessary, or a complete accident, and then only for the briefest of moments. Kirk caught up with him and together they walked across the lawn. You once told me all that you wanted to share with your brother, and here you have a chance to reach out to his son, yet you won't. What is stopping you?

"There you are!" came McCoy's booming voice. "Jim, you've got to save me from this new niece of mine. I'm an old man. If I keep trying all those new-fangled dances, I'm going to have a heart attack! Take over for me, will you?"

"All right, Doctor," said Kirk with a grin. "I'd hate for you to litter the dance floor with your prone body. Spock, tell him what's in store for us. I'll be back."

Tess finally got what she had hoped for all evening, the chance to be held in Kirk's strong arms as he twirled her around in a breathless polka. He was a contradiction - one moment boyish and carefree, the next serious, almost intimidating - and that fascinated her. When the dance finally ended, she pleaded exhaustion and he steered her over to a bench, leaving to get drinks for both of them.

"Thank you," she said as he handed one to her, then slid down so he could sit beside her. She looked over to where McCoy and Spock were deep in conversation. "I've never met a Vulcan before," she said. "He seems very nice."

"He's more than that," said Kirk quietly, almost to himself.

She looked at him, but he was looking at Spock with an expression she had never seen on anyone's face before.

"You've known him long?"

"It seems a lifetime."

"I hope Peter says that about me someday," said Tess with a wistful tone in her voice.

Kirk's attention was back on her. "Some people find love a dangerous discovery, Tess."

She shook her head. "Not to someone who had never known love before I met Peter." She glanced over at Spock. "The wonder of love outweighs the dangers, wouldn't you say?"

Then, thought Kirk, this child is hitting a little too close to the mark. He was grateful to see Peter walking over to them. "It's about time," he called out. "I just swept your wife off her feet. I think she needs a little mouth-to-mouth resuscitation." He got up. "I'm heading for bed. You two can stay up all night if you want."



"Uncle Jim..." Peter's voice stopped Kirk. "Thanks for coming."

Kirk looked at him and for an instant found himself wanting to hug the boy standing across from him, yet knew he never would. "Goodnight, Peter." He glanced at Tess. "You've caught yourself one dilly of a helpmate."

"Don't I know it!" said Peter, putting his arm around Tess.

"Goodnight, Jim," said Tess. "Sleep well." As he walked away, Kirk had the distinct impression that Tess knew he would probably get very little sleep that night, and an uncomfortable feeling that she knew why.



Kirk followed Spock on his hands and knees, crawling through the dark digs of the ancient Kadarn civilization. He had honestly expected to be bored, thinking of archaeologists as dusty old men with long beards who never lived in the present. When they had arrived on Kadar as part of Peter's honeymoon party, he had discovered a lively group already gathered, and they were as far removed from being old fossils as he could imagine. He was quickly infected with their enthusiasm. In turn, they were impressed by his intelligence, and the quickness he showed in understanding what they were teaching him.

To everyone's surprise, except for Kirk, Spock appeared to be well-versed in Kadarn history, and his knowledge of archaeology rivaled that of many of the more qualified people. As always, Kirk was proud of his Vulcan.

My Vulcan, he chuckled to himself as he crawled along. I wonder if Spock would resent it if he knew I thought of him that way? He looked at the shadowy figure moving ahead of him. Then again, he probably already knows. I wonder if I have any secrets of my own? Probably not. When you get to the point where silent communication accomplishes more than the spoken word, I guess there's little left to hide.

Ahead of him, he saw Spock getting to his feet. He crawled a little further, then did the same. The corridor they had been moving down was dimly lit. Looking up, he saw a bright light.

"Is that the vault?"

"Affirmative," said Spock. "It appears to have remained untouched by intruders through the many centuries of its existence. It is a find of incalculable value."

"Come on, let's go look!"

The vault was the burial tomb of an ancient Kadar ruler, containing all the objects of value from that earlier time. Kirk and Spock stopped in the entrance. The Vulcan's face was expressionless, but Kirk's mirrored his awe of the beauty contained within.

"My god," he said finally, "I've read about such finds, but I never thought I'd see anything like this!"

The entire vault was lined with the precious metals of Kadar, the lights causing brilliant reds and blues, golds and greens to glow from the walls. Magnificent carvings adorned the metal, and huge figures molded out of the same substance were placed at regular intervals around the vault.

In the middle of the floor stood a large throne. A tall, sculpted figure was seated on the throne, dressed in a heavy material which, from a distance, looked like plush velvet. What held Kirk's attention was the handsome face and the green eyes which held his so unblinkingly. Dark hair cascaded over the figure's shoulders and the strong, veined hands held firmly onto the throne's arms.

Somehow Kirk's hand had found Spock's arm. "It's spooky," he whispered. "It's almost as if he's alive. I get the feeling that all I have to do is say hello and he would rise to his feet."

"Why don't you try it?"

Kirk shot a startled look at Spock before he realized he was being teased. "Very funny," he said, dropping his hand, but he was grateful that Spock had broken the spell and the beautiful statue had become just that, a model of a man long since dead.

Cheerful shouts rang out as they were noticed, and they were given a conducted tour and an exhaustive explanation of a lot of contradicting theories. Kirk grinned at Spock's pained expression. The Vulcan was not used to so many normally logical minds all running amuck at the same time, with little supporting evidence for the theories they were expounding.

When they had finally finished looking at each startling work of art, Kirk found himself once again drawn to the figure on the throne. The others were busy discussing the marks under each of the carvings on the wall, trying to decipher what language they might be based on. None of them noticed Kirk moving away, except for Tess. She stood watching Kirk as he stopped in front of the throne, and was suddenly startled by the similarity of the two figures. Physically, they were different, but each held an aura of power.

Then she noticed Spock was staring at Kirk as well, seeming almost transfixed by the sight. Quietly, she moved toward him. The Vulcan intrigued her. She had tried to make friends with him, but he had remained distantly polite. It was only when he was with Kirk that a different side of his personality was allowed to show. "They are very alike, aren't they?" she said quietly.

"Indeed," said Spock.

Tess looked at him, surprised by Spock's openness. "He would have been such a man had he lived in those times."

Spock nodded. "He is a leader. He could not exist otherwise."

Tess glanced around, but the others had moved further away, still arguing about the writing. She looked back at Kirk, Peter's observations concerning his uncle running through her mind. "Why won't you let people into your life, Jim?" She spoke so softly that she did not expect anyone to hear. She had not realized the keenness of Vulcan ears and saw Spock freeze at her side. Instantly she knew she had made a mistake. For a brief second they had shared something, and, by speaking her thoughts aloud, she had unwittingly killed it. However, Spock was spared the necessity of trying to answer when Kirk looked over at them.

"He must have been quite a man," he called out.

Spock and Tess walked over. Tess stared at the motionless figure; Spock looked at Kirk. Kirk met his look, a little puzzled by the expression on Spock's face. Then his attention was diverted by Peter's arrival.

"Hey, folks, we're calling it a day. Larry's organizing a fishing party and we're going to try to catch some flannu. Like to come along?"

"Indeed I would," said Kirk. "I was hoping to get in some fishing. I know McCoy would like to as well. Spock...?" His question left the Vulcan an easy out.

"If you do not mind, I have other plans," said Spock apologetically.

"Right," said Kirk. "Shall we go?"

Tess took Peter's hand as they walked along behind Kirk and Spock. *I wonder what it was that they really said then?* she thought. *They seem to have some sort of private language that doesn't involve the words they are*

speaking. She glanced over at Peter and saw him smiling at her. Suddenly she was foolishly happy at being alive and married to somebody so wonderful. She threw her arms around her astonished husband. "I'm going fishing with you, Peter," she said, suddenly not able to bear the thought of being away from him for several hours. "I think it's about time I learned to put a worm on a hook."



The swift stream bubbled through the carpeted forest; the strong sun glinted off the foaming water. Ranged along the banks were the ardent fishermen of the group. The more serious had waded into the stream and were casting into the various pools and hollows. The others were sprawled on the mossy banks, letting their lines spill out into the water, waiting for something to come along rather than seeking out their quarry.

Tess was curled up at Peter's feet. Kirk and McCoy sat a short distance away talking quietly. Suddenly Tess let out a shriek as the pole in her hand bent deeply.

"Don't let go!" yelled Peter, momentarily fearing Tess would throw the rod into the rushing water. Quickly he instructed her as to how to work the fiesty flanna over to the shore where it could be easily netted. Eventually a large, fat fish lay glistening in the sun.

"My word," said McCoy, "that one could feed a family for a week!"

"Is it really that good?" asked Tess.

"I'm impressed," said Kirk. "It's no easy task keeping something like that hooked long enough to bring it to shore."

"In that case," said Tess in happy relief, "I hereby retire to watch the menfolk fish. I don't like it!"

They all laughed and turned their attention back to their poles; gradually their conversation started again. Suddenly McCoy froze at something Peter was saying.

"Uncle Jim, why didn't you ever start a family? In this day and age I know marriage is pretty much an outdated institution, and heaven knows you've earned your freedom, but don't you sometimes feel you've missed out on something awfully important?"

McCoy's eyes flashed to Kirk's face and saw the pain he knew would be there. He remembered the first time he had ever met Carol Marcus. It had been years earlier, but already her reputation as a scientist was well-established.

He had heard all about her from Kirk. A few years before Kirk and McCoy first met, Jim and Carol had been quite close, but it had broken off for the usual reasons. They were both driven professionals and neither could - or would - change their goals. But from the way Jim still talked about her, there was an obvious fondness and a great deal of respect there.

On one early shore leave the young Lt. Kirk and the newly enlisted McCoy had spent together, Jim discovered that Carol was stationed on a nearby planet, so they had piled into a shuttle on the spur of the moment and gone to surprise her.

"Jim - oh my god!"

McCoy's eyebrows lifted. It wasn't exactly the reaction he had been expecting, from what Kirk had hinted about the relationship.

"Hi, Carol," said Kirk with an easy smile. "Guess I'm about the last person you were expecting. This is Dr. Leonard McCoy. I've told him an awful lot about you."

"And all of it good, I might add, Dr. Marcus," said McCoy gallantly as he tried to figure out why she suddenly looked so nervous. Then a loud wail sounded from behind her.

"Oh..." She seemed suddenly at a loss for words. "Come on in," she said finally, then turned and hurried ahead of them. "David, what on earth have you managed to get into now?" She picked up a small, blonde child who stopped crying as soon as he was in her arms.

"Babysitting?" asked Kirk.

Carol looked at the child for a moment, then shook her head, not looking at Kirk. "No."

"Oh," said Kirk, momentarily at a loss for words.

"Jim..." Her voice died away, then she put the child down again. "Here, David," she said, giving him a toy. Finally she looked at Kirk. "Would you like a drink, Jim? How about you, Dr. McCoy?" Both men were staring at the child.

Suddenly Kirk reached out and grabbed her arm. "How old is he?"

"He was two last week."

McCoy looked at her sharply. It was now obvious to him why she was nervous, and it was obvious Kirk was making the connection, too. "Jim, perhaps we'd better..." He broke off. Neither of them even knew he was there.

"Is he..." Kirk couldn't say it.

She nodded. "I wanted this child, Jim. I didn't want to burden you..."

"Burden me? My god, Carol, he's my son!"

"How hold it right there?" said Carol angrily. "It was my choice to have him and my choice to keep him. I wasn't going to tell you, and if you remember our last conversation, you'll know why."

Kirk looked like he'd been hit in the stomach. "We were honest with each other."

She nodded. "And we'll continue to be. I look after him well, Jim, and he doesn't need the confusion of people running in and out of his life. I'll give him everything he needs..."

"Carol, he's my flesh and blood..."

She almost flinched as she looked at the pain in his eyes, but something inside refused to let her back down.

"Yes, he is. But unless you can love us enough to stay with us, you'll stay away from him, and from me..."

McCoy closed his eyes. The incident had precipitated one of the few times he had ever seen Kirk cry. It was after that that McCoy noticed Kirk's attitude toward other people changing. He remained the charismatic leader but, except for Spock, few people would ever be close to him again. That episode had left an indelible mark on Kirk, and McCoy had no idea if Carol Marcus was still a hot dagger in Kirk's heart.

Kirk's voice caused McCoy to look over at him. He was not looking at anyone, but had his eyes fixed on the rushing water. "I wouldn't be any good as a father, Peter; I'm not in one place long enough. It's no good for a kid to know his..." his voice broke a little, but he covered it with a cough, "...his father by a collection of stories. If he can't have the real thing, then it's better he have no father at all." He looked over at Tess. "I have a feeling you know what I'm talking about," he said with a slight smile.

She nodded. "I never knew my parents, but I think I would have resented it had I thought they didn't feel I was worth bothering with."

McCoy's mouth tightened. This was not a good conversation. "Hey," he said, "why don't you two take this monster back to camp and get dinner started while Jim and I go upstream and see if we can capture some breakfast?"

"Sounds good to me," said Tess with a grin. "Okay, Peter?" He nodded and started reeling in his line. Kirk shot a grateful look in McCoy's direction, which the doctor acknowledged with a raised eyebrow.

Peter and Tess were out of sight before McCoy spoke again. "You okay, Jim?"

Kirk was kneeling beside his tackle and, for a moment, McCoy wasn't sure he had heard the question. Finally he shook his head. "How long does the pain last, Bones? Why can't I forget?"

"Because you're human," said McCoy, putting a hand on Kirk's shoulder, his heart aching as he saw the unshed tears in the hazel eyes. "You wouldn't be the man you are if you deliberately forgot your own son."

"It's funny," said Kirk with a bitter laugh. "I keep expecting to hear from him. Does he hate me so much for staying away? Hell, she was the one who told me to..." Again his voice broke, but this time he did nothing to disguise the misery he was feeling.

"I can't answer that," said McCoy quietly.

"No, I know," said Kirk, momentarily putting his hand on top of McCoy's and giving it a gentle squeeze of thanks. "Guess I'm down on myself again."

"Yeah, well, let's go get some fish, then head on back. A good meal and a sound sleep will help clear up that mood."



The idyllic days had to come to an end. The preliminary exploration of the dig was completed and more experts were coming in to start the detailed cataloging. The universities were ready to start their new semesters, and the various instructors had to get back.

McCoy was going to go on ahead with one of the first groups leaving. He had to get back to interview some new medical personnel who had applied for assignment on the *Enterprise*. Kirk and Spock would follow in a few days with the honeymoon party.

The night before McCoy left, the three friends went for a long walk in the bright Kadarn moonlight. It was a comfortable time with little conversation, just the easy companionship that they had shared for many years. Finally, they stopped at a grove of trees. Kirk stood looking at the vast array of stars, his mind obviously far away.

"Star light, star bright..." McCoy's voice jolted him back to the present. "What were you wishing, Jim?"

"Who, me?" Kirk smiled slightly. "That this moment would never end. That the life we know would never have to come to an end." He looked at the others. "It's just so right, the three of us together..." He fell silent.

McCoy looked at him, worry clouding his eyes. "That was an awfully wistful tone of voice, Jim."

"Was it?" said Kirk. "Sorry." He leaned back against one of the trees. "I was talking to a group of Peter's friends earlier today. They were hot under the collar about a professor who had insisted on coming to these digs when he was long past being useful. They were discussing the difficulties it caused them when he couldn't keep up;

when he interfered with the work being done." He sighed slightly. "I remember when I used to feel that way."

"You're hardly interfering here, Jim," said Spock softly.

Kirk looked at him. "Not here, no."

I don't like this, thought McCoy. Jim sounds like he's including himself in the "useless" category. Doesn't he realize yet how much we need him, how much so many people need him? Maybe he's right. Vacations often don't seem to be the best thing for him. When he's buried under a mountain of work, he doesn't have time to dream up such nonsense. There's a real purpose to his life, but he seems to be losing sight of it. "I think it's time you ended your vacation, Jim," he said aloud, trying to change the mood. "Is this the same man who was trying to run Starfleet single-handedly a few weeks ago?"

"Was I being a nuisance then, Bones?"

A cold lump hit McCoy's stomach. What was Kirk driving at? "Only to me. I think everyone else was grateful you could do their job better than they could."

Kirk smiled. "Admiral know-it-all."

"You better believe it, and I want no more of this kind of talk. A university professor, no matter how good, is nowhere near being in the same league as a man of starship rank, especially one named Kirk. Useless is the last word I would use to describe you!"

"Okay, I won't argue." Kirk looked at his chronometer. "We'd better head for bed. You've got to get up early, Doctor, and after all our lazy days of sleeping in, it might prove to be a bit difficult."

Their conversation on the way back was full of cheerful kidding, and McCoy gradually relaxed. Whatever it was that had held Kirk in its clutches seemed to have vanished, leaving the confident man he had always known.



A few days later, Kirk caught up with Spock as the Vulcan was finishing his breakfast. "The kids are going down Luben's Tunnel. You want to come along?"

"Do you think that's wise, Jim? Most of the experienced personnel are gone. That part of the find is newly opened, and most of it is not yet properly shored."

"Oh, come on, it's not that dangerous. Besides, we just might find another vault down there. Would you want to miss something like that?" Spock admitted that he wouldn't, so, against his better judgment, he joined the large group.

As they passed through the vault where the figure sat in eternal splendor, Spock noticed Kirk lagging behind. He stopped and watched as Kirk once again stood in front of the magnificent carving. Finally he retraced his steps. "Are you all right, Jim?"

"Hum?" Kirk seemed to be struggling to bring his thoughts together.

"You appeared to be somewhat preoccupied."

Kirk smiled slightly. "Guess I was." He reached out and touched the edge of the figure's robe. "I wonder if he ever had any problems?"

"Anyone who has lived has had problems."

"I suppose. Sitting there like that, though, you somehow get the feeling he managed to avoid them."

Spock looked at him thoughtfully, then drew a deep breath. "Jim, what's bothering you?"

Kirk didn't meet his questioning gaze. For a while he had been able to forget the fear and depression he had been living with back at Starfleet, but now that their vacation was coming to an end, it was back, worse than ever. He stood in silence for a few minutes, knowing he had to let go, had to reveal to someone what he had been fighting, and acknowledge the fears that were winning. He finally looked at Spock, knowing the Vulcan was one person he could tell without diminishing himself in the other's sight. "I'm tired, Spock, and a little scared. I'm always having to compensate for this damn head of mine that refuses to work properly. McCoy's wearing me out by constantly breathing down my neck, asking questions, repeating tests that tell him the same thing over and over again. Everywhere I turn at Starfleet I find people with their hands out, always wanting more than I can give. I can't go back to that, Spock. To be honest, all I want to do is slump down in a corner and let life go on without me."

Spock's eyes softened, knowing the trust it took for Kirk to have told him something so personal. "Depression can be a dangerous opponent, Jim," he said quietly, knowing he didn't have to say anything more. Kirk would understand what he was talking about. As Kirk nodded slowly, Spock continued, "I gather you have said nothing to McCoy about this."

Kirk shook his head. "I think he's suspicious, but if I let go, he'll take my command."

Spock looked at him, his dark eyes filling with concern as he realized the depth of Kirk's depression. "Dr. McCoy is very unlikely to do that."

"Maybe," said Kirk without conviction. "He said he wouldn't let anyone with my efficiency rating on duty..."

His voice softened. "Then he said I wouldn't let anyone with my efficiency rating on duty, and he's right." He turned away. "Am I kidding myself that I'm still the man I was before that damned accident?"

"Jim, I believe the doctor mentioned those efficiency ratings before you came to Kadar in an attempt to force you to take R & R. You have had several weeks to relax. I would imagine your tests are now satisfactory. As for your last question, if you have the awareness to ask, you are not looking to me for an answer."

Kirk turned around and looked at the Vulcan. "McCoy once said something very like that, when I expressed similar doubts about the M5 computer."

"I assume your answer then was correct."

"Then it was. Now? Now I'm not so sure." He sighed. "Come on, the kids are way ahead of us. It wouldn't do if the senior members of the expedition got lost."

The rumbles and accompanying vibrations ratched them long before they got to Luben's Tunnel. They had to balance against the rock walls to stop themselves from being flung off their feet.

"Damn!" swore Kirk. "Something's happening ahead." He increased his pace, stumbling along the gloomy corridor, Spock close on his heels. When they got to the entrance of Luben's Tunnel, all they found was dust and rubble.

"I do not believe there is another entrance," said Spock.

"Then we go in from this end," Kirk said with quiet determination. Together they set to work on the pile of rock that was blocking their way. It took a long time to dig a hole large enough for them to fit through. The tunnel ahead was littered with rocks and debris, but they managed to pick their way through.

"Jim, look out!" A hard shove sent Kirk sprawling down the tunnel. He lost his footing on the loose rocks and fell heavily, striking his head against a jutting rock. He was unconscious before he hit the ground. He didn't hear the rocks falling, didn't see them knock Spock off his feet and crush him against the wall.



"Uncle Jim?" A gentle hand was wiping his face. "Come on, wake up."

Kirk groaned slightly as he opened his eyes. A blurred, double image gradually came into some sort of focus. "Spock..."

"Lie still, you're the only one here."

"But he's..." Kirk tried to get up, but he couldn't. His right arm and leg were refusing to function. "He was..." His voice broke off in a gasp as a knifing pain seared through his head, causing him to momentarily lose consciousness.

"Jerry..." Peter's voice reached Kirk's ears from a long distance away. "Give me a hand. We've got to move him to a more stable area." Kirk felt himself being lifted and tried to protest, knowing there was something important he had to do, but too confused and disoriented to remember what. Then blackness rose up and claimed him again.



A cool cloth was running over his face. The knife was still there, throbbing its searing pain through his skull. He opened his eyes.. Tess was sitting with his head in her lap. "Peter, he's awake!"

Instantly Peter was at his side. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay," said Kirk weakly. "What happened?"

"Usual trouble with archaeological digs - an earth shift. We seem to be trapped, but the tunnel's open ahead so we're going to continue on to see if there's any way out."

Kirk stirred restlessly, knowing there was something important he had to remember, but his head hurt too badly to concentrate. "Must get up," he said, his head spinning as he moved. His vision started to fade and he slumped back down, hitting the stone floor with a fist clenched weakly in frustration. He was totally helpless.

"Don't worry, we'll get out," said Peter with more confidence than he felt. He nodded to the others as Jerry stepped forward. They carefully lifted Kirk to his feet. "Can you hang onto us, Uncle Jim?" Just then there was another slight tremor under their feet. "Come on," said Peter, "we'd better get out of here."

They didn't make it. Traveling burdened as they were, even as spread out as the group was, they did not escape the next rockfall. Kirk felt himself being shoved down and tried to see what was happening, but suddenly there was too much blinding dust, and all he could do was draw choking breaths like the others.



"How many, Tess?"

Tess finished tying the bloodstained cloth around Kirk's head, then looked up at Jerry who was standing over them. "Fifteen or sixteen, I'm not sure." She turned to Kirk, who had begun struggling to sit up. "Hey, take it easy," she said as she eased him back against the wall with Jerry's help.

Kirk waited for a few minutes until he was sure he wasn't going to pass out again, then looked at Tess. "What

happened?" He felt he was beginning to sound like a broken record.

"Which time?" asked Tess wearily. "You've been unconscious for three hours." She picked up a hollow stone filled with water. "Here, try to drink some of this."

Kirk took a couple of mouthfuls, then put his head in his hands. It felt like it was going to fall off, and he wished it would do so soon. Eventually he looked up. "I heard you say something about sixteen?"

"That's how many we know are still alive after the last cave-in. If it weren't for Jerry and..." Her voice broke and she swallowed hard. "We're lucky to have that many left."

Kirk felt a jolt run through him as Tess's voice broke. He looked around, his head reeling at the movement. "Where's Peter?" he asked, a cold hand suddenly clutching at his insides as Tess turned away.

"He's back there, Admiral," said Jerry softly, pointing at a pile of rock and dirt filling the corridor. "He was hurt in the last rockfall, but insisted that we get you out first. By the time we tried to get back to him, it was too late."

"We've got to get him out!" said Kirk, his mind screaming a denial of Jerry's words.

"Admiral, it's too late!" Jerry's voice softened. "Everyone's too badly hurt for heroics, including you."

Kirk slumped back against the wall. Jerry was right. He could bluster all he wanted but this time he could do nothing. Then he suddenly remembered Spock, buried somewhere behind them under tons of rock and debris. There was no way he could still be alive. Over half the kids, including his nephew, had been killed, killed because they had insisted on dragging him along. They were young and mobile, they could have made it without him. Like the old professor, he was but a useless appendage, and now had been the cause of needless death. The young should not die to save the old, it was not the right order of things. He closed his eyes and for the first time in his life admitted defeat.



The lights in the room had been dimmed, throwing gentle shadows on the soft beige walls. A man lay curled up on a bed in the far corner. He faced the wall, unmoving, his arms wrapped around his head, obscuring his features. The coveralls he wore showed him to be a patient. Hidden equipment monitored him closely. A tray of food sat untouched on a table beside the bed.

A slight buzzing sound indicated that the lock on the door had been activated. Light flooded the room as the door opened, then was cut off as the panels slid shut. Footsteps came closer to the bed, then stopped. There was no reaction from the curled figure.

"Welcome back, Jim."

For a long time there was no response, then the man slowly brought his arms down and rolled onto his back. "Bones?"

"One and the same," said McCoy as he looked at the reddened, tormented eyes of his friend. "Rumor has it you need a medical man, so I came as fast as I could."

"So they obviously don't think I'm a terminal case," said Kirk, a shadow of a smile beginning to pull at the edges of his mouth. But the smile didn't touch his eyes, the haunted, almost wild-looking eyes that had once been so full of self-assurance and confidence.

McCoy stood looking at Kirk in silence for a moment. "Do you feel like a terminal case?" he asked finally.

As they looked at each other, McCoy could see the fear flickering in the hazel depths. Then Kirk rolled onto his side, slowly curling back into a fetal position, his arms once again wrapping around his head.

McCoy took a slow, deep breath. "Your lunch is on the table, Admiral. You'd better eat it before everything congeals. I'll be back later." There was no answer, nor had he really expected one.

"He's on constant monitor?" asked McCoy as he stood in the office of the Director of Services Rehabilitation.

"Twenty-four hours," said Eric Trainor, research specialist as well as director of the large facility.

"It's the wrong approach," said McCoy bluntly. "Come on, Eric, be sensible! He's got a severe head injury, he's confused and disoriented, desperately needing the contact of other people, and you're watching him with a monitor? Good god, man, where's your humanity?" He glared at Trainor. "The *Enterprise* has gone out on a shake-down cruise. On my medical authority I'm taking him out of here and back to people who do care."

"You're what? Leonard, you're out of your mind!"

"Not quite, Eric, but you'll have Kirk out of his if you keep him in that room much longer."

"He already is."

An icy coldness crept into McCoy's eyes. "On what do you base that diagnosis?"

"Tests. The face that since he regained consciousness he hasn't spoken, refuses to eat unless forced..."

McCoy snorted. "He just talked to me and sounded rational enough. I think if you check your precious monitor you'll find him eating too."

"You're as crazy as he is!" said Trainor. He scanned the coded board in front of him, then activated the view-screen. "You see, he's..." His voice broke off as the image of James Kirk appeared on the small screen. He was sitting at the table slowly eating the meal that had been placed there some hours earlier.

"I've always maintained that solid food was better than dripping in nourishment by IV's," said McCoy with a smile.

"I don't believe it!" said Trainor. "We had to sedate him almost to unconsciousness to be able to feed him." He looked at McCoy. "I imagine you have authorization to take him..."

McCoy dropped a tape on his desk. "The Enterprise shuttle is waiting to leave."

★
"...it took over a week to dig through the rubble. They found Spock almost by accident the first day, crushed under a rockslide. They sent him straight to Earth since they had no personnel qualified to deal with a Vulcan. The message came with him that there was little hope for any other survivors..."

"There weren't many," said Kirk bitterly.

"No," agreed McCoy quietly, "and none of you were in very good shape when they found you. By the infinite wisdom of somebody, they took you to Alpha IV. I wish to hell I could have been there, but that damned Starfleet wouldn't let me go to Kadar, and then they didn't notify me that you'd been found. I know you needed me, Jim, and I'm sorry I wasn't there, that Spock wasn't there." He looked at Kirk, but the question he had long expected Kirk to ask still didn't come.

He got up and slowly moved to the smoky divider that separated Kirk's bedroom from the large working area beyond. Kirk was in his own quarters; McCoy had not taken him to Sickbay. After what Kirk had endured at the hospital, McCoy knew any type of restraint or monitoring would cause him to withdraw further into himself, so he had brought Kirk here and would place no restrictions on his movements. Finally he turned back to Kirk. "You haven't said anything about Spock. Aren't you concerned about the fate of your best friend?"

Kirk's hands clutched tightly at the blanket covering him. "I can't think of..."

"I'm not asking you to, Jim. I was just looking for a little human concern, or did they manage to take that away from you at the hospital? Heaven knows they've lost it themselves!" He moved forward. "I know how difficult it was for you to try to tell me what happened and I understand how you must feel about those kids, but for god's sake, don't sacrifice yourself as a person!"

Kirk's eyes fell. "I'm sorry, Bones. Is Spock...is he...?"

"He's on Vulcan," said McCoy with a reassuring smile, "and we're on our way to pick him up. Now that he knows you're all right, I would imagine he's putting in a top-speed recovery." He sobered slightly as he came to sit on the chair beside Kirk's bed. "When we thought you were dead, he was absolutely devastated. There was little I could do for him, so I ordered him on extended sick leave and sent him home to Vulcan where his injuries could be treated by their healers." He ran his hand through his hair, then looked back at Kirk. "In my heart I knew I was sending him home to die."

"You said he wasn't that badly hurt!"

"He was hurt, Jim. Physically, he could have recovered if he had tried to help himself, but we thought you were dead. The essence of what he is revolves around you, and you weren't there. He wouldn't try."

"God, no," said Kirk softly, almost to himself, "it can't be like that again, not now..." *I can't have anyone depending on me, not after what happened, what I did...caused...*

McCoy looked at Kirk, puzzled. Kirk had obviously forgotten he was there. His mind seemed far away and McCoy sensed he was withdrawing. He quickly changed the subject. "Jim, I pulled you out of the hospital with Trainor ready to put the crazy label on your file..."

"Just because I wouldn't talk to him?"

You're rational, thought McCoy. You knew exactly what those people were after, yet something inside you wouldn't let you give, something very deep and painful. He nodded. "You're no crazier than I am. You must have had a good reason for staying silent, for refusing to eat. What was it?" McCoy held his breath, waiting for Kirk's reaction. It was either going to be extremely violent, or...

Slowly Kirk curled up onto his side. Before he could wrap his arms around his head, McCoy shoved a pillow at him. "Here, hang onto this."

Kirk hugged the pillow tightly against his chest. His eyes were closed and his breathing harsh and ragged.

"You're not alone any more, Jim," came McCoy's voice.

"That's just it, Bones. I don't deserve your caring. I should have been left to die..." He let go of the pillow and started to lift his arms.

"No, Jim," said McCoy, catching his hands, "it's time to face reality, to stop running from it." It took real

strength for a minute to stop Kirk from fighting him. Gradually Kirk relaxed and McCoy put his hands back on the pillow. "Okay now?"

Kirk shook his head. "It'll never be okay."

McCoy reached out and covered Kirk's hands with his own. "Jim, you've got to let it go. Can't you try a little?"

Kirk opened his mouth, then hesitated. "I don't think I have any answers, Bones."

"How about questions? What is it you can't answer?"

"Something you can't help me with."

For a moment their eyes held, then McCoy slowly stood up, knowing Kirk couldn't take any more at the moment. "I think that's enough for now. You need sleep and I need some dinner. Give me a yell if you want anything. I'll be back to check on you."

"Could you turn off the light before you go?"

"You sure you want the dark?"

"I've lived with light since I came to back at the hospital. I just want to sink into an all-enveloping blackness, an absolute nothingness. Maybe then I can sleep..." His voice grew very quiet. "Maybe then I can escape the nightmares..." He shuddered as the cruel memories rose up again. The sight of those dead kids, the awful thought of Spock crushed and alone for all those days...and it was all his fault.

"I've got some..." began McCoy.

"No, thank you, but I don't want any drugs. I can't run from this and I shouldn't be allowed to forget."

"Forget what?"

Kirk shook his head. He couldn't tell McCoy, not yet.

"Okay," said McCoy. "You sure I can't bring you something to eat?"

Kirk shook his head again. "You managed to get me to eat a large meal only a few hours ago."

McCoy watched as Kirk pushed the pillow away and curled up with his arms once again wrapped around his head. He felt fear touch his heart. The *Enterprise* was on its way back to San Francisco via Vulcan. In a few weeks Kirk would be facing a panel of experts who would be carefully evaluating his ability to retain command. How much damage was there? How much could be healed before then? McCoy wasn't worried about the physical aspect; that would heal in time. It was Kirk's mental state. Unless Kirk would open up and talk to him, he could do nothing to help. Damn and blast Starfleet! Because of their endless stupidity, Kirk had spent two weeks in that infernal hospital. After he had regained consciousness, he had had two weeks of isolation to build up to the crisis he was now facing. McCoy was sure that if he had been able to get to him before this he could have done something to help, even might have been able to avoid the whole situation.

Kirk had told him a little bit about what had happened during the cave-in, about what had happened to the kids, but he had said nothing about what had happened to him. It was something that had torn away whatever it was that made Kirk the extraordinary leader he was, and McCoy had to find some way of getting it back, or else...



As the days passed, McCoy spent a lot of time with Kirk. Medically, Kirk was making slow improvement. The trauma of his head injury had brought back, to a lesser degree, the physical weakness that had accompanied the previous skull fracture. However, Kirk had learned then the absolute necessity of physical therapy and did not argue with McCoy's rigorous schedule. While McCoy worked with him, he kept trying to steer their conversation to Kirk's nagging problem, but Kirk kept evading the questions. Gradually Kirk's haunted look disappeared, but the pressures remained. His restless pacing around the ship underlined the remaining inner tension.

"Hey, Jim-boy, you want some company?"

Kirk turned to see McCoy coming down the corridor behind him. "Sure, Bones, the more the merrier."

"You're excited to have Spock back, aren't you?" said McCoy with a grin.

Kirk nodded. "I keep thinking how I would feel if he had died, if I had failed him too..."

"Failed him too?" asked McCoy curiously. "Who else do you think you've failed?" Kirk looked at him with sudden desperation in his eyes, and McCoy had a feeling that he was almost ready to open up; but this wasn't the time or the place, and they both knew it. He took a deep breath and prayed that there would be an opportunity later.

Kirk stood fidgeting in the transporter room until the materialization process had been completed and Spock stood alive and whole in front of him. "Welcome aboard, Commander." Kirk's voice underlined the strength of his emotion.

For a long moment Spock stood motionless on the transporter platform, his eyes drinking in the sight of the man he had believed dead.

Spock's lost weight, thought McCoy. His color doesn't look all that good, but then, it never does. He watched Kirk walk forward, a grin playing around his mouth.

"I'm not an apparition, Mister. You could at least say hello."

Spock appeared to shake himself mentally. "Permission to come aboard, sir," he said, his eyes locked on Kirk's face.

"Permission granted," Kirk said quietly.

Slowly Spock stepped down off the transporter platform until he was facing Kirk. A soft warmth touched his eyes. "No, you are not an apparition."

"Not yet," said Kirk with a grin.

McCoy saw the weakness Spock was trying to hide and knew he had to get him down to Sickbay as soon as he could. Quickly he moved to stand beside Kirk. "By all the stars, Spock, don't your Vulcan healers believe in feeding their patients?"

Spock had to drag his gaze from Kirk, but he made a valiant effort to return the humor. "No more so than does the medical practitioner aboard this ship," he said, looking pointedly at Kirk.

Kirk laughed. "Looks like we're going to have to program our own recovery. Come on, Spock, I'll walk you to your quarters. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

McCoy caught up with them at the turbolift. "I'm going to have to detour you, gentlemen," he said as all three of them stepped into the turbolift. "You, Spock, are coming to Sickbay."

"Doctor, it is not necessary..."

"It won't work." He held up a tape. "This arrived from your people yesterday. You're not exactly healthy, my friend, not according to this."

Kirk's eyes were instantly filled with worry, a reaction which McCoy noted with approval. "Spock, are you ready to leave Vulcan? Should you..."

"Admiral," said Spock gently, a strange thrill running through him as he gave the title to a man he had been sure was dead. "Jim," he tried again, "my recovery has been somewhat slow, but please believe me, I will recover."

To Spock's surprise, Kirk looked away, refusing to meet his eyes. "Was I the cause, Spock?"

McCoy suddenly felt like he had been forgotten. Right now these two were meeting a crisis, even if they didn't know it. He held his breath.

"It was the rocks and exposure to gas that caused the injuries..."

"That's not what I asked, Spock," said Kirk bluntly. "I want to know if that's true."

Spock looked at McCoy, bewilderment clear in his eyes. He had never seen Kirk like this, so tense, almost afraid. But afraid of what? What he was saying made no sense, yet it appeared very important to Kirk that he be answered.

The turbolift slowed to a halt and the doors slid open. McCoy breathed a silent prayer of relief. "Come on," he said, putting a hand on Kirk's shoulder, "we can continue this some other time. Spock's got to get to bed."

Kirk tore his eyes away from Spock and looked at McCoy, then nodded. "All right, Doctor, later." He looked back at Spock, and the Vulcan could see the internal struggle for control. "I'm glad you're back, Spock. I'm glad..." His voice broke slightly. "I'm glad you're alive." Abruptly he turned and was quickly out of sight around the corner.

Spock turned to McCoy. "Doctor, something is wrong."

"Later, Spock," said McCoy firmly. "Right now you're turning the color of lime sherbert, and if you don't get into a bed, you're going to be flat on the floor. Once you've had a chance to rest and recover from that blasted transporter, we'll talk about it, okay?"

Spock looked doubtful, but he was in no shape to argue. It was only strength of will that was keeping him on his feet. Within a short time he was sound asleep in Sickbay, his relief at knowing Kirk was alive, his satisfaction at being back aboard the *Enterprise* overriding any questions about Kirk's unusual behavior.



Kirk ignored the buzzer. He knew who it would be and he didn't want to talk to him. The buzzer went on and on. McCoy wasn't going to be easily discouraged.

"Jim, I know you're in there. Do you want everyone on this ship standing here while I shout at you?"

"Go away!" yelled Kirk. He pulled the pillow over his head.

"No way, Admiral! Either you let me in or I'll have the door phasered open..."

Kirk hurled the pillow across the room as he got off the bed and slammed his fist down on the lock release. McCoy walked in on unleashed fury. Kirk waited until the door had shut behind McCoy and cut off his view of a few

astonished crewmembers, then he exploded. "How dare you threaten me!"

"Jim, I..."

"I am in command here, Doctor! My authority is..."

"At the moment absolutely nil," cut in McCoy. "In case you've forgotten, I haven't certified you fit for duty."

Kirk's smashing fist sent McCoy reeling backward across the room. He wiped out a row of books and two sculptures on the way, and landed in a heap in the corner.

Kirk stood stunned for a minute, gazing at his scraped knuckles, then looked at McCoy who was groggily shaking his head. "My god, Bones, I...I'm..." He fell silent, unable to believe what he had just done.

"Is it safe to get up?" asked McCoy, gingerly rubbing his jaw, "or should I stay down for the count?" He lifted the sculpted Greek head from out of his lap where it had landed, and slowly got to his feet. "I'd sure hate to have you mad at me for long," he said with a lopsided grin as he wiped blood from his mouth.

"Well," said Kirk lamely, "you're always after me about holding in my feelings."

"I didn't exactly mean to use me as a whipping boy - not in the physical sense, anyway." He put the sculpture back on the shelf, then looked at Kirk and saw he had gone absolutely ashen. "Hey, you'd better sit down!" Quickly he caught hold of Kirk and guided him to a chair, then got some brandy and poured out a glass for himself. "I need this," he said by way of explanation. "I'm afraid you can't have any. It causes irrational behavior."

Kirk smiled slightly. "It's a good try, Bones, but it's not going to solve anything."

"Just what is the problem? Jim, don't clam up on me. Do you know how close you came to falling apart back in the turbolift? What were you trying to do, destroy both Spock and yourself in one easy go?"

"I don't know what I was trying to do," said Kirk miserably. "It just suddenly seemed very important to know how much...how..."

"How important you are to him?" asked McCoy gently. "I've already told you, and I know he has."

Kirk got up and walked a little away from McCoy, then reached down and picked up one of the books that had fallen to the floor. "I'm going to lose him, Bones," he said finally.

"What sort of nonsense is that?" snorted McCoy. "I saw your reaction in the transporter room, yours and his. Nothing else existed for you, just him. It was obvious he felt the same way."

Kirk smiled a small, sad smile. McCoy had completely misunderstood what he had said. He was going to lose Spock by destroying him, in the same way he had destroyed the kids on Kadar. Finally he put the book back on the shelf, then rested his hand on the statue that McCoy had put back minutes before. "Bones, do you remember when we were on Kadar, just before you left; you asked me what I was wishing when I was looking at the stars."

"I remember. You said you wished life would go on forever just as it was."

Kirk nodded. "We talked about life, and about usefulness."

"Jim, I'm not following you."

"I'm not surprised. I'm not altogether sure I can follow myself." He turned back to McCoy. "I was so sure of myself once, but it all seems a very long time ago." Suddenly he found he wanted to tell McCoy everything. He stared at the doctor, his body starting to tremble from tension and strain. How could he start?

McCoy returned Kirk's stare, seeing the pale face and trembling body, seeing a man who was only a few steps away from total collapse. Suddenly Kirk turned sheet-white and McCoy reached out to grab him. "Hey, you'd better get off your feet! Come on, time to hit the sack. We can clean up this mess later."

Kirk tried weakly to push him away, but McCoy only tightened his hold as he guided Kirk to the bed. As he went, Kirk desperately wanted to get out the grief and guilt he was carrying with him; his grief at the death of the kids, including his nephew, and the guilt for having caused it. All he wanted McCoy to do was to listen while he stumbled through the maze of self-doubt and recrimination that held him trapped, but suddenly he couldn't find the strength to speak.

McCoy saw only the exterior - the sudden collapse added to the earlier depression. Depression was a dangerous adversary. Kirk said he felt he might lose Spock, but it could easily go further than that. It could develop to the point where Kirk would lose himself.

Kirk's feeble struggle had ended by the time McCoy got him onto the bed. He lay face down, his head buried in the pillow. He wanted to scream and yell against the unfairness of life but all he could do was clutch at the cover as his only available anchor. And in that position, blackness rose up to take him.

McCoy carefully tucked the covers around Kirk, then stood looking down at him, not realizing that he had unintentionally blocked Kirk's desperate effort to talk. What is it? he wondered. Something happened that has started you questioning yourself, but about what? He shook his head. The questions were starting to come, but would there be any answers, and would they come in time?

Before Spock was fully awake, he knew Kirk was there. How often had he woken to find that serene presence at his side? It was impossible to know. He opened his eyes slightly, not really wanting Kirk to know he was awake. It wasn't often that he had a chance just to lie and observe his friend.

He was glad he hadn't opened his eyes very far. Kirk was sitting in a chair beside his bed. His chin was resting on his folded hands which, in turn, were resting on the back of the reversed chair. The hazel eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the Vulcan, almost as though they were ready to warn of some danger. Spock felt puzzlement fill him.

For a long time Kirk didn't move, then finally he reached out and took one of Spock's hands in his. An immediate warm thrill again ran through the Vulcan. He was beginning to realize just how much he thought he had lost. He fixed his eyes on Kirk's hand, the cool fingers curled around his warmer ones; the human's other hand softly traced the tips of the Vulcan's fingers.

Spock was warned by footsteps that McCoy was coming and carefully shut his eyes. He left his hand limp, hoping Kirk wouldn't let go.

"Hey, you're supposed to be asleep," said McCoy softly. Spock almost gave himself away, thinking McCoy was speaking to him, but Kirk answered before he had a chance.

"I was too restless, Bones."

"Come on," said McCoy gently, "there's no sense waking him up."

"Can't I stay?" came Kirk's voice. "I'll be quiet, I promise."

"You sure you're all right?"

There was a long silence, then Kirk's voice came again, full of uncertainty. "Being here helps - being able to look at him, hold his hand. Maybe I can work this thing out if I can be near him. He's always helped in the past..."

"You need rest," came McCoy's voice with a hint of stubbornness, "and so does he."

"I'll be quiet, Bones, I promise." Spock felt his hand being put back down on the bed and heard the soft scraping of a chair being turned around. "There," came Kirk's voice again. "If I sit quietly, can I stay?"

Spock heard McCoy's exasperated sigh and knew Kirk had won. He smiled slightly in satisfaction and, without meaning to, fell asleep.

A soft muttering woke Spock a short time later. He opened his eyes, wondering for a minute where he was. By the surroundings, he suddenly remembered he was in Sickbay aboard the *Enterprise*. He looked in the direction of the sound. Kirk had fallen asleep in his chair. He was moving restlessly, obviously agitated by his dream. Spock threw back the thermal sheet and swung out of bed. Carefully he took hold of Kirk's shoulders. "Jim...Jim, wake up!"

As the hazel eyes snapped open, Spock was momentarily aware of a deep-seated fear in them. Suddenly Kirk's knees jerked up and he kicked out, catching Spock full in the chest and propelling the Vulcan the entire length of Sickbay. The force of the kick upended Kirk's chair and he went over with a loud crash.

The combined noise of Kirk and Spock falling brought McCoy on the run. He arrived just in time to see Spock slam back first into a cabinet, and Kirk starting to scramble to his feet. "Hold it right there, Admiral!" he roared as Kirk started to move forward. He grabbed Kirk's arm. "You've done enough," he said as he pulled Kirk back, picking the chair up with his other hand. "Sit down!" He didn't wait to see if Kirk was obeying him or not. Spock had fallen hard and he wasn't getting up.

"Bones, I..."

"Shut up!" said McCoy fiercely as he stooped beside the Vulcan. There was a trickle of blood just behind Spock's right ear and the Vulcan was out cold. He grabbed a scanner from the mess on the floor and ran it over Spock. He glanced up to see a nurse come running in. "Get Dr. Chapel, and hurry!"

Christine was there in minutes. Together they got Spock back onto the bed. "You need any help?" McCoy asked her.

"No, it just looks like a simple bump. I'll call if I need you. Where'll you be?"

"Admiral's quarters," said McCoy. He took hold of Kirk's arm. "Come on, let's go."

As soon as they were out of Sickbay McCoy let go of Kirk, but stayed very close to him as they walked the short distance to his cabin. As the door shut, Kirk blindly made his way to his desk.

"All right," said McCoy, "what happened?"

"I don't know," said Kirk, not looking at him. "I was asleep."

"You were asleep? Come on, Jim, you've got to do better than that!"

"I was!" said Kirk defensively. "Suddenly he was there shaking me, and I panicked. It fit in so well with what I was dreaming." His voice softened. "I was back in the hospital. They would come in when I was sleeping in order to catch me unawares. Two of them would hold me down while they sedated me, then they would try to force-feed

me. They wouldn't give me a chance..." His voice died away, then he looked at McCoy. "What did I do to him?"

Kirk looked so stricken that McCoy couldn't stay mad at him. "Other than knocking him cold, I don't think you did any permanent damage." He rubbed the bruise on the side of his face. "You're certainly starting to take your problems out on your senior officers." Kirk looked down at his hands but didn't say anything. "Well," said McCoy, "you still need sleep. Come on..." He practically lifted Kirk to his feet and pulled him over to the bed.

Kirk froze when he saw the hypo. "No, I don't want..."

"Shut up!" said McCoy firmly. "I've just about had it with you. You can stop being a martyr. No matter what you've done that you think deserved punishment can't be deserving of the torture you're putting yourself through. I know who you are, Jim, and you're not guilty. Now get a grip on yourself and the realities of life!" Again Kirk fell silent but the anxiety didn't leave his eyes. He watched as McCoy selected tranquilizers and a sedative, then pressed the hypo against his arm. "There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

There was no change in Kirk's eyes. Never before had McCoy seen them look so wounded. Kirk reached over and touched the area where the medication had been pressured in. "Would you tell Spock I'm sorry?"

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

"No, I don't think it would be a good idea for me to go near him for a while."

"Is that going to help?" asked McCoy quietly.

"I don't know, but at least it won't make things any worse than they are now." Kirk's eyelids were starting to grow heavy.

"We'll talk about it later," said McCoy as Kirk's eyes were closing. He waited until he was sure Kirk was safely asleep, then he headed back to Sickbay to check on Spock.

The Vulcan was conscious and Christine had just finished sealing the small cut behind his ear. "Nothing serious," she said in answer to McCoy's unspoken question. "A good crack on the head is all. None of the earlier injuries were aggravated." She put down the laser. "Need me for anything else?"

"Don't think so," said McCoy.

"Okay; I hate to sound callous, but I'm in the finals of the bridge tournament. Be in rec room 7 if you need me again."

"Good luck!" McCoy called after her departing figure. *Goodness, Chris, you really have grown up!* He shook his head, then turned back to Spock who was about to burst with questions. "Lie still," he said before Spock had a chance to start. He touched the bruise on his face. "You're not the only one our cool Admiral has decked in the past twenty-four hours." He pulled up a chair. "I'll tell you what little I know about what's happened to him. It doesn't totally explain his behavior, but at least you'll know what he's been through."

McCoy told Spock everything that Kirk had told him, including the treatment at the hospital. "He needs you badly, Spock, he needs your strength and understanding. You've always been there for him, then when he needed you the most, during that damn isolation at the research hospital, he thought you were dead. I don't know what fantasies he's thought up, but they must be quite something to have him this wound up, to be so close to breaking. Any little thing sets him off."

"I see," said Spock as McCoy finished. "Now I understand his reaction. I must have startled him." He was silent for a moment, thinking about what McCoy had said, and even more about what he had not. Finally he looked at McCoy. "You have not yet certified him fit..." He said it as a statement, but McCoy could hear the question in the words.

"No, not yet."

"Why not?"

"I think two pretty good reasons are sitting right in this room. His control is still tenuous. He's a lot steadier than when I took him out of the hospital, but he still has trouble controlling his emotions and it scares him as much as those around him. He's got a lot of internal pressures and until he can talk them out, we've got to keep pretty close tabs on him."

"His medical status is known at Headquarters?"

McCoy nodded reluctantly. "However, I have the transcripts from Eric Trainor in my office. Unless Starfleet specifically asks for them, that's where they're staying. Hopefully, by the time the *Enterprise* is ready to go, this mess will have sorted itself out." He stood up. "I think that's enough for now; you're looking like lime sherbert again. Talk to you later."

Just as McCoy was reaching the door, Spock's voice stopped him. "Doctor, what exactly is lime sherbert?"

McCoy turned. "You've never seen any?" Spock shook his head. "I'll add some to your dinner. Look at the color of your face before you eat it."

Kirk was still asleep when McCoy went back to look in on him. He had given Kirk a hefty shot which would keep

him sleeping straight through the night. He carefully undressed the sleeping figure, his heart aching at the sight of the thin, drawn face. There was so little time before they would have to face Starfleet. He pulled the blankets up, then he dimmed the lights. Kirk still maintained that he preferred the dark, but he might be disoriented if he woke during the night, groggy with sleep, and McCoy wanted to be sure that Kirk knew where he was.



The next days passed peacefully enough. Spock had put himself into a healing trance at long last. When he had thought Kirk was dead he hadn't bothered, had not cared whether he lived or died. Only the great skill of Vulcan healers had kept him strong enough to overcome the injuries he had received.

McCoy spent all his time with Kirk. There were no more violent actions, but Kirk was very shaken by what he had done to both Spock and McCoy. McCoy used this to his advantage, pointing out to Kirk the absolute necessity of talking about his problem. Kirk saw the logic of McCoy's argument and tried very hard to cooperate, but he couldn't let go.

Kirk and McCoy were in the rec room when Spock and Christine Chapel walked in. Although he had his back to the door, McCoy knew from the tension radiating from Kirk that they had arrived. He had not told Kirk that Spock had come out of the healing trance the night before, nor had he mentioned the fact that he had asked Christine to escort Spock to the rec room which, in the late morning was empty except for themselves.

He looked around. "Well, there's an encouraging sight. Come and join us!" Spock and Chapel walked over. McCoy got the distinct impression that Kirk was about to bolt out the door. "How are you feeling, Spock?"

"Quite fit, Doctor, thank you. I believe I can..."

"Spock, just this once, let me make the medical decisions around here? What you think and what I think differs mightily."

"I have noticed that," said Spock, unable to hide the twinkle in his eyes.

"That's not what I meant!"

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen," said Christine, "I have to get back to work."

"Oh, sure," said McCoy, wondering if he should take up Spock's challenge, but Kirk took the decision away from him.

"I'd listen to McCoy, Spock. He's been on the rampage lately, holding hands and wiping noses..."

Spock nodded. "I thought his treatment rather gentle. I have not been nauseated once since I returned to the Enterprise."

"I can see I'm not appreciated," said McCoy in a mock huff. He got up and stalked out, crossing his fingers as the door slid shut behind him.

For a few minutes Kirk and Spock sat looking at each other. Finally Kirk broke the silence. "Spock, I'm sorry for what happened in Sickbay. I don't know what I..."

"Apologies are not necessary, Jim. You were asleep and I startled you. The fault was not yours. I should have remembered that you tend to fight with your feet more than your fists."

"Well," said Kirk with a sheepish grin, "it saves bruising your knuckles."

Spock smiled slightly. "I suppose so."

The silence fell again, Spock wondering at the awkwardness and Kirk desperately trying to think of some excuse to leave. "Uh, did you have a good rest on Vulcan?"

Spock thought about it for a moment. "In general terms it could have been called a rest. However, I am afraid I made a good many people angry at me."

Kirk smiled. "I didn't know the average Vulcan got angry."

"Most would not admit to the emotion. However, one did, and I was administered an old-fashioned 'chewing out', I think is how my mother would have described it." He placed his hands on the table, his long, thin fingers at ease, in total contrast to the tense human sitting opposite him. "I spent some time at Gol. Once I was strong enough to leave the healers, it was felt that I would benefit from some of the simpler disciplines..."

"And did you?"

For a long time Spock stared down at his hands, then he looked up at Kirk. "No."

Kirk felt the breath catch in his throat. Spock didn't need to say anything more. They both knew what it was that had prevented the peace of non-emotion from helping the Vulcan through the black depression he had known.

Spock watched a wealth of emotion flash across Kirk's expressive face and knew that he was very close to a decision. He waited in silence, scarcely daring to breathe as Kirk opened his mouth. The time had come...

"Hey, what's for lunch?"

Kirk actually jumped at the sound of Sulu's voice. Nothing else had existed for him at the moment except that he had to tell Spock about his terrible guilt. He had to talk about what he had discovered about himself, and have

the Vulcan tell him what he should do about it. Now that moment was gone, snatched away from him. Just as he had once almost reached out to McCoy and had lost the opportunity, he had lost this one as well. He buried his face in his hands.

"Jim?" Spock's hand cautiously touched Kirk's shoulder.

"It's okay," said Kirk in a muffled voice. He looked up, his eyes bright with unshed tears. He stared at the Vulcan. He had almost given in, almost told Spock the one thing he found so hard to admit, even to himself; that he could no longer be the man everyone expected him to be. He looked over at Sulu, standing in the doorway with McCoy right behind him, and he briefly wondered at the grim expression on McCoy's face. Was he grateful that Sulu had stopped him, or was he going to lose his sanity totally if he didn't confide in someone? It was too late now to know. He got to his feet. "Come on, Spock. Remember what I said about programming our own recovery? I think it's time we started."

Spock looked at him, then slowly rose to his feet. Kirk had been awfully close to letting go when they were interrupted. McCoy had said that Kirk had come to him in Sickbay because the human needed him, needed to be with him, so he would go. He would go wherever Kirk went, so he would be sure to be there when the need rose again.



"You know something?" said Kirk as he and Spock walked down the corridor. "I think I enjoy exploring the *Enterprise* more than anything in the galaxy."

Spock looked at him in amusement. "There are few officers who know her better than you do, Jim."

"Oh, I didn't mean just what makes her tick; anyone with half a brain knows that. I mean just looking around, poking my nose into places I don't normally go. At least that is one benefit about not being on duty, I'm not being interrupted every thirty seconds."

But you are startling half the crew out of their wits as you go, thought Spock to himself. *They are as unused to seeing you in their departments as you are to being there.*

They were making their way to the shuttlecraft bay. For the past few days Spock had accompanied Kirk at McCoy's suggestion, not saying he had intended to do so anyway. McCoy knew the only way Kirk was going to resolve his problem was to talk it out. Spock still knew only what McCoy had told him of Kirk's problem. Kirk had not spoken of it himself since that one time he had tried in the rec room. So now Spock was doing what he had done so often in the past; he was at Kirk's side, ready for the time when the dam burst and Kirk needed him.

They met Scotty coming out of the shuttlecraft bay, muttering under his breath. "Trouble, Scotty?"

"Ach, these new-fangled contraptions. I told them it wouldn't work!"

"What wouldn't work?"

"The lock on shuttle four, sir. Remember our last overhaul at Banai IV?" Kirk nodded. "Some bright young engineer designed a wonderful new locking system based on compressed air. Unfortunately, it seems he hasn't had time to work out all the bugs, but naturally Starfleet was eager to go ahead and give it a try."

"And?"

"We've got three shuttles locked firmly in place, and one with a real hankering to do a little free-flight without leaving the ship!" He shook his head. "I wish I had that lad here right now. I'd use him for a lock!"

"From your grumbling, I assume you have everything under control," said Kirk with a grin.

"Oh, aye," said Scotty. "I think so, but it's still a bloody nuisance."

"Cheer up," said Kirk. "Just think of the report you can file."

"Heads will roll!" said Scotty with conviction. "Well, if you'll excuse me, sir..."

The shuttlecraft bay was humming busily with engineers and cadets when Kirk and Spock walked in. The four craft were at their moorings, each primed and ready for flight at any given moment. Here, as everywhere else on the ship, everything was neatly in its place. Kirk had instilled that habit into his crew a long time ago. They looked at the lock on shuttle 4, then slowly walked across the bay toward the huge doors which allowed access to space and beyond.

Kirk turned back to look at the vast expanse of the shuttlebay area. "This is one of the few places that gives me some feeling of how big this starship is," he said quietly. "Corridors and cabins, even the bridge give the feeling of being enclosed. But this vastness..." He was interrupted by the siren of red alert. A calm voice from the bridge warned of an ionized asteroid shower. All hands were to stand by for evasive maneuvers.

Kirk and Spock watched as the duty personnel ran across to the shuttlecraft for a security check. Kirk noted that some of the new cadets were with them.

Spock looked at Kirk. "Admiral, perhaps we should..." He never finished what he was going to say. A sharp lurch threw them off balance and Spock grabbed at Kirk to stop them both from falling. Then came a series of slapping jolts, followed by a spinning turn to starboard, causing them both to go crashing to the floor.

A panicked yell brought Kirk twisting out of Spock's hold. The errant lock had broken and the shuttle was being flung forward by the whipping turn. "Get under the other shuttles!" Kirk yelled. "Move!" The older crewmembers obeyed him instantly. The cadets broke for the door.

"No," yelled Kirk, "not that way!" He scrambled to his feet and started forward. Spock quickly pushed himself up and started after him.

"Jim, you don't know where that shuttle is going!" Suddenly the *Enterprise* lurched again. Spock flung himself forward and grabbed Kirk. The shuttle whipped by them, sending them flying. Spock shielded Kirk from the collision and the subsequent fall as best he could. Cries of terror were followed by a deathly silence.

Kirk lay unmoving in Spock's arms, his eyes tightly shut. "They're dead, aren't they?"

Spock stared at him. This was a totally unexpected reaction. Kirk seemed afraid to look. "They panicked," he said simply. "They did not think."

"No," said Kirk, finally opening his eyes. "They panicked, yes, but they didn't know what to do because obviously no one had ever taught them. No one ever took the time to make them learn how to survive."

"Jim, the odds of a shuttle breaking loose are..."

"Don't quote odds to me!" snapped Kirk savagely. "I knew what to do, so did you, because someone once told us, and we remembered. Those cadets didn't have a chance. We might just as well have murdered them in cold blood." He pulled out of Spock's arms and got up, slowly making his way across to where the others were standing. The cadets had been trapped between the wall and the flying shuttle. They were dead.

Just then the doors opened and McCoy came running in. "Jim, thank god you're all right!"

Kirk looked at him for a moment, then gestured to the carnage just a few feet away. "Tell that to them, Doctor. Tell that to their families." Abruptly he turned away and walked out.



Spock and McCoy met each other at the door to Kirk's quarters. "Has he said anything to you?" asked McCoy.

"Negative," said Spock. "I have not spoken to him since the Starfleet shuttle brought the latest correspondence 2.3 days ago."

"Well, he wants to see both of us, so I guess we might as well get this over with." He pressed the buzzer and the door slid open. Glancing at Spock, he led the way inside.

Kirk was sitting at his desk. He looked up as Spock and McCoy walked in, but didn't get up.

"We're here at your request, Admiral," said McCoy. His eyes softened. "It's been two days, Jim. I was getting worried."

A slight smile touched Kirk's face. "I'm sorry, Bones, but I had a lot of things to think about. I had to face something and no one could help me."

"I presume you found the answer," said McCoy.

"Yes, I think I have. Please, sit down." As Spock and McCoy sat, Kirk got to his feet and started pacing. Finally he stopped and turned toward them. "I got a tape from Tess."

McCoy couldn't tell from Kirk's expression whether the news was good or bad. "And?" he prompted gently.

"She's pregnant," said Kirk shortly.

"Hey, congratulations, Uncle!" said McCoy, a wide grin crossing his face.

"I believe the correct term would be great-uncle, Doctor," said Spock. "As the child will be one generation removed from the Admiral's nephew, and as he is already an uncle to him, it would be incorrect to use the same term."

"I no longer have a nephew," Kirk broke in bluntly, causing both Spock and McCoy to look at him sharply, but he didn't seem to notice as he continued in a quieter voice. "I've made another discovery, a rather astonishing one, really. You were right, Bones, I am too old..."

"Jim..."

"No, please let me talk this out. When we were on Kadar, I foolishly thought that what we had could go on forever. I had exactly what I wanted, the best ship in the Fleet, the best crew and..." his voice softened, "...two of the best friends a man could ever have."

"Admiral..."

"Now don't go formal on me, Spock. Please, just listen." He looked at McCoy. "Remember when I told you about people not knowing when to move over and let other people lead? How some people become a burden because they are no longer physically able to cope?" He covered his eyes with one hand. "There are kids dead today because of me, crushed under tons of rock and debris..."

"Jim, you can't blame yourself!"

"Yes, I can, Doctor. It was because I couldn't keep up that they died. They were young and mobile. Without

having to drag me, they stood a better chance of surviving long enough to be rescued."

"Jim, you are no..."

"No longer twenty, as you've been telling me. Maybe if I had been, I would have been successful in finding some way out." He shook his head. "Four cadets lost their lives on this ship a few days ago because they didn't know simple survival procedures." He looked at McCoy again. "I wasn't injured then..."

"Nor were you responsible, Jim," said Spock quietly. "You were not on duty."

"The *Enterprise* is my ship, Spock; that makes it my responsibility! Someone didn't do their job, and that responsibility lands right on my head." He walked to a chair and sat down. "How many more kids are there on this ship who are waiting to die? How many more are there throughout the Fleet whose death warrant is already signed?"

"You're only one man," said McCoy bluntly. "What can you do about it?"

"I'm resigning from command."

"To do what?" asked McCoy in angry astonishment.

"I don't know," said Kirk with complete honesty.

McCoy shot a look at Spock. The Vulcan's dark eyes were fixed on Kirk's face, but McCoy could not make out what he was thinking. He looked back at Kirk. "Jim, this sounds like another reckless decision. Remember what happened last time you gave up the *Enterprise*?"

"We are talking about lives, irreplaceable lives, Doctor," said Kirk with a trace of bitterness in his voice. "Loss of life because of me. I've been selfish long enough, keeping people around me who could better help those coming up through the ranks. I can deal with my own problems, but I can't keep shouldering the guilt of their mistakes because no one bothered to train them properly." His breath shuddered a little as he struggled for control. Finally he looked down at his hands. "I'm worn out from dealing with death," he went on, his voice very low. "It's finally won."

The room was completely silent. Kirk had finally bared his soul, as McCoy had been trying to get him to do, but now the doctor could think of nothing to say.

Finally Kirk looked up. "There's another reason I have to leave. Tess is going to need me."

"Jim, she's a strong woman..." started McCoy.

"She's a child who no longer has a husband and who is carrying a baby who won't have a father because of me!" He bit his lip, then drew a deep breath. "Bones, all my life I've run from commitment when it hasn't served my purpose, when it threatened to interfere with what I wanted to do, but I can't run from this."

I've never heard a more incorrect self-assessment in my life, thought McCoy, but I don't think even a herd of rampaging Gorns could knock sense into you right now.

For a moment their eyes held, then Kirk looked over at Spock. "You've been very quiet."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Spock.

Kirk smiled slightly. There would be no condemnation here, only support as far as Spock would be able to give it. "I don't have the slightest idea, other than that I'll stay in Starfleet. If I do leave the *Enterprise*, you'll be up for promotion."

Spock could have cried at the look of loss in Kirk's eyes. He drew a deep, steadying breath before he dared trust his voice to answer. "Jim, I did not leave the disciplines of Kolinahr and Vulcan merely to gain rank in Starfleet."

Kirk's eyes changed slightly. Spock's message had come through. "If you stay with me, you'll lose the freedom of the stars."

Spock sat in silence. *You've been hurt badly to feel you must leave the Enterprise, leave one of the few things you have ever loved.*

"Well?" asked Kirk.

"Jim," said McCoy, "you're way off-track. Neither Spock nor I agree with you at all on this one..."

"I agree with him, Doctor," interrupted Spock, understanding the desperation that had driven Kirk to this decision, the same desperation that had once sent him fleeing to Vulcan. *No one could argue sense into me then, he thought, and no one will be able to do so with you now. But I'll stay with you until you are ready to come back to space, Jim, to take again what rightfully belongs to you. One day you will discover you're not too old, and I am content until then.*

"You what?" said McCoy in astonishment. He felt a sudden fear run through him as he saw another parting of the ways. Jim wouldn't make it without Spock this time. The Vulcan couldn't leave him now! "Spock, you're in line to make captain!"

Spock nodded. "In rank only, Doctor. I will not take a command."

McCoy felt relief surge through him at Spock's words. "They'll do everything in their power to make you take

one," he said uncertainly.

Spock nodded, but said nothing.

"Jim," said McCoy turning away from the Vulcan, "how do you know that Nogura's going to go for this?"

"I've already talked to him," replied Kirk. "It's all set up. I even got another promotion out of it. I think he's delighted that I'm coming back to Headquarters." He hesitated for a moment. "Are you with me, Bones?"

McCoy stared at him. He saw plainly on Kirk's face the inner feelings that he had always kept hidden. The man was crying out for his help. Finally he nodded. "Well, I told you once before that I would never turn from you again." But I'll be waiting, Jim. One day you'll realize this isn't the right thing for you to do and you'll need a swift kick in the pants to get unstuck from whatever mess you manage to get yourself into. This time at least I'll be there to give it to you.

A smile touched Kirk's eyes, the first one in a long time. "I was hoping you'd say something like that. He pulled a bottle of brandy out of a drawer and poured out a drink for each of them. "To us," he said.

Spock and McCoy looked at each other. Once again Kirk was leading them into the unknown. This time they would follow him without question, waiting until he found what he was really searching for and, when he found it, they would be there to rejoice with him.

"To us," they echoed as the three glasses touched.





A TIME TO CARE

"No!"

The tortured word tore to the depths of McCoy's soul. He saw Kirk's lips tremble as the admiral slumped to the floor, the "oh my God" on his features as the awful realization of what had just happened started to sink in. Right now McCoy was grateful for the state of shock they all felt. It was the only thing holding any of them together.

"Scotty," he said quietly, "is there any way you can run these engines from another section?"

Scott looked at him blankly, not understanding.

"Damn it, man!" hissed McCoy under his breath, "I want all these cadets out of here before Jim breaks down. He may not care about his command image at the moment, but he's got to go on, and I don't want him to have to regret a brief moment of human weakness!"

"Aye, Doctor," Scott responded numbly. He took a deep breath and looked around, noticing for the first time that the decks of engineering were packed with onlookers, both cadets and seasoned crewmembers. "All right," he addressed them briskly, "cadets meet in briefing room six in ten minutes, in clean uniforms. All other personnel back to stations. Mr. Stuart," he said, turning to his second-in-command, "I want you to take a crew to auxiliary control. Keep a close watch on the mains. If anything seems amiss, contact me either here or in the briefing room. Under no circumstances are unauthorized personnel to return to the main engineering section until I give the order. Is that understood?"

"Aye, sir," Stuart said softly. He threw a sympathetic glance at Kirk, then called to his men. They left on the heels of the cadets.

"It will be an hour before the radiation is cleared, Admiral," Scott said to Kirk. "We'll get him out then." Kirk didn't answer. Scott looked at McCoy, but the doctor only shook his head. Sighing, Scott left.

So, thought McCoy, the three of us together: one dead, one possibly destroyed... Hell, I'd give anything for a stiff drink right now. He walked forward. "Jim?"

Kirk didn't even seem to realize he was there.

"Come on, Jim, there's nothing you can do for him now. You can't stay on the floor." He reached out his hand, but Kirk pulled away.

"Leave me alone, McCoy. I don't want your sympathy. I can't..." His voice broke.

"Jim..."

Kirk looked up at him. "Get out...please."

"Sorry, no. I'm not leaving you alone."

"Damn it, don't you understand it's Spock in there?"

"Hey, I'm not the enemy," McCoy said softly. He knelt down in front of Kirk. "Would he want to see you like this?"

Suddenly Kirk seashed his fist against the curve of the protruding entrance chamber, against the glass wall that prevented him from reaching Spock. "I couldn't even touch him! He died blind and in horrible agony right in front of my eyes, and I couldn't even touch him!" He rested his forehead against the glass opposite Spock. "How can I accept something from you that I couldn't give him?"

McCoy studied Kirk thoughtfully. *Trust you to find a way of taking the blame on yourself. There's no way you can be held responsible for the actions of that crazy Vulcan, but I'll never get you to admit it.* He finally sat down. "Jim, how long have you known Spock?"

Kirk's eyes were fixed on the silent body inside the control room. "Forever," he said.

McCoy smiled slightly. "I'll accept that for now. Who were his friends?"

"Everyone liked Spock."

"His friends, Jim. You're not listening to me."

Finally Kirk looked at him. "I don't understand."

McCoy glanced at the terrible radiation burns that marred the Vulcan's normally sculpted features, then tore his eyes away. He couldn't face that, not yet. "Where was Spock when you first came down here?"

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"You have to!" McCoy said harshly, almost shouting. "Where was he?"

"In there," said Kirk, his voice breaking.

"Yes. He was in there, and we were out here...and there was a hell of a lot more than just glass separating us."

"He knew you were there..."

"Sure he knew. But he was going to die as he had lived much of his life: alone. Like a wounded animal, he'd turned his back on us and was waiting for death to take him." The agony in Kirk's eyes was almost more than McCoy could take, but he flung the stark reality of Spock's death right in his friend's face. It was absolutely necessary that Kirk see what had actually transpired, rather than live with cruel images of self-hate. "He turned his back on everyone..."

"But when I..." Kirk faltered, looked at Spock, then lifted his hand as though to reach out to the silent form. McCoy held his breath. "He came when I..."

"Yes," McCoy agreed. "He knew he had only a few minutes left. To be able to spend them with you made them possible to bear. You gave him back the self-respect he had thrown away. You know how many people were in here. Think of how they'll remember him now - not as a man who gave in to death, but as a man who lived for a friend." He took hold of Kirk's shoulder. "He didn't die alone, Jim. You were with him. There was no barrier between you, no separation. Think about it. Were you aware of anyone else?"

"No," Kirk said softly. "Only him." He smiled slightly. "And for a moment all I wanted to do was take hold of him and shake him silly..."

"Why?"

"The Kobayashi Maru. He had the audacity to ask me what I thought of his solution." He swallowed hard. "Maybe it's just as well I couldn't say anything. I might have told him, and it would have ended a beautiful friendship."

McCoy smiled. This was the Kirk he knew, struggling to face reality, not running away from it. "For someone who swore he had no sense of humor, Spock came up with some mighty good quips." He glanced at the radiation meter. The light was still red. "He's got to be taken out of there, Jim. The *Enterprise* still has work to do, and we can't leave engineering blocked off forever."

Kirk stiffened, objections racing through his mind. Then he again saw Spock standing in front of him, asking him not to grieve. *It isn't logical at all, Spock, he thought, to have to go on somehow without you. But I know you would try if it was me in there...*

"Jim?" McCoy's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Yes, Doctor, you're right." He slowly got to his feet. "It will have to be a sealed coffin...too much contamination to clean up..." He hesitated, then turned to face McCoy. "Give me this time with him alone?"

"Jim, I..."

"Please, Bones. I have to say goodbye, and I'd like to be able to do it in my own way."

Finally McCoy nodded. He had said it to himself: Spock had only one friend. Who was he to deny that friend now?



When McCoy returned, Kirk was gone and Spock's coffin was already resting in the black casing that would carry it on its final journey. He nodded slowly, understanding why Kirk had felt it his duty to see Spock safely to his last resting place. He would never know what had passed between them - there was a part of their lives he had never shared. He called for a medical team to come and move the coffin, then turned and walked away. He wasn't foolish enough to think that the agony of loss was over. But the dead had been cared for, and now it was time to care for the living.



AS I STAND HERE

I hated everything you stood for,
And resented you for being too much
The cardboard hero,
The boy scout who never grew up.
Then I stood and watched
As you faced impossible odds,
And won,
Simply because you refused to believe
You could lose.
You made a believer out of a skeptic
By getting us away from Regula,
By crippling the *Reliant*.
And - somehow -
By escaping Khan's final play.
Now, standing here,
I no longer see the cardboard hero,
But a man terribly hurt
By the loss of something most of us
Will never find.
As I listen to your trembling voice trying,
In simple words,
To say what can never be said,
I feel my own tears surface at your agony.
As I stand here
I know pride -
Pride for who you are,
And the beginnings of respect, and perhaps love,
For the man who is
My father.





Remember

The simple word keeps whispering through my mind,
Bringing the shadowy image of
A canted eyebrow rising,
As a smile threatens to curve the gentle repose
Of quiet lips.
But even as the image comes,
I know that is not what you meant
When you said,
"Remember."

You did not ask me to remember you,
But to remember him.
To remember that when he hurt,
You were there to help,
Now you would be there no longer.
When he was bowed by the weight of command,
You were there for him,
Now you would be there no longer.
When he cried, overcome by life,
He always turned to you,
Now you could be there no longer.
So your gentle voice asked me to
Remember.

To remember how you helped him
To laugh,
To cry,
To love,
To grow.
No, my friend,
There was no selfishness in your request,
Even in death he was your first concern.
So you touched my mind and asked
That I take your place,
Now that you would be there no longer.
But surely you knew,
Even as your fingers brushed my face,
That no matter how hard I tried--
And, Spock, I will try--
No one can possibly, for him, replace
The one who is there no longer.



The ceremonies had been planned for a long time and everybody who was anybody was in attendance. Heihachiro Nogura, Commanding Admiral of Starfleet for more years than many could remember was finally retiring, and all the elite under his rule had gathered to wish him well.

"Jim! Damn it, man, I haven't seen you in a cluster of light years!"

Spock noted the pained expression on Kirk's face as a jovial, grey-haired Commodore rapidly approached them, and watched with growing interest.

"Why bless me," continued the man, "this must be your famous Vulcan!"

Kirk saw, with a glimmer of amusement, the insulted look that crossed Spock's face. *At least I'm not the only one who has to suffer this fool*, he thought. "Greg," he acknowledged, smiling thinly. "Spock, I would like you to meet Commodore Gregory Upp."

"Commodore," said Spock, bowing politely.

"Oh, retired, dear boy," said Upp with a smile. "Long since retired, although Jim and I shared some great moments. Yes, indeed, some very great moments! Ah, there's Wesley! Must be off..." He disappeared into the crowd.

"Thank god for small favors," breathed Kirk.

"I have not heard you speak of Commodore Upp," said Spock.

"Can you blame me?" said Kirk with a grin. He sobered, then drew a deep breath. "He and I did some heavy drinking together once." He looked at Spock. "Before V'ger." His eyes darkened. "We both had memories we were trying hard to drown." He reached out and touched Spock's arm. "That was a long time ago, Spock, and the bad memories have been washed away."

Spock nodded, knowing that period was no longer painful for either of them to remember. "Might I suggest we give our regards to the Admiral..."

"And get out of here before more of our past catches up with us. I agree. Come on..."

They finally found Nogura standing across the large hall. Many people were surrounding him, but, as usual, he had the air of being alone. He broke off his conversation as he saw Kirk approach. "Jim!" he said, hastily excusing himself from the group around him. "My savior," he added as he grabbed Kirk's arm and led them both to a quiet corner. "Why am I always surrounded by idiots?" he asked with a smile as they came to a stop. "The smart ones like you get out." He looked at Kirk. "You did something I often wished I had had the nerve to do. You told me to get the hell out of your life, that you would do damn well whatever you pleased..."

"Now, Heihachiro, I hardly did..."

"You took charge of your life, Jim. Men rarely have the courage to do that." He glanced at Spock, then looked back at Kirk. "And you had the added courage to reach out for what you wanted most."

Spock turned his attention from Nogura to Kirk, only to find his commanding officer looking at him, the same question shining out of the hazel eyes that he knew was in his own. Exactly what did Nogura mean? His words could be taken many ways, and all of them would be right. And to which of them had he been speaking?

"Ah, well, you don't have time to be bored by the ramblings of an old man," continued Nogura. "I know the *Enterprise* has been put behind schedule because of this silly gathering, a stupid waste of time for so many..."

"We came because we wanted to be here," said Kirk softly.

"In order to pay our respects to a good officer," added Spock with a slight bow.

Nogura smiled as he shook his head. "Coming from you, I could almost believe it. No, gentlemen, you have work to do, lives to live, but I appreciate you taking the time to come." He looked around. "Now I had best get back to

the people I like least." He reached out and took Kirk's hand in both of his. "Thank you for trying to cheer up an old man, Jim." He looked at Spock. "Take care of this hothead, Mr. Spock. Don't know that I'd trust him by himself." Before Kirk could bluster out a response, Nogura had walked away.

Spock reached out a hand to stop Kirk from going after him. "I believe the admiral asked us to leave. You can gain nothing by going after him, hothead, sir."

Kirk whirled around, then laughed softly. "Okay, I'll come quietly. I'll even accept hothead, but I can damn well look after myself, Mister, and don't you forget it!"

Kirk and Spock walked back to the shuttleport in silence. Spock kept glancing at Kirk, sensing he was preoccupied by something that was disturbing him. He said nothing as Kirk handed over the card to retrieve their shuttle, then they moved to the waiting area.

"Why do I feel so uneasy about Nogura, Spock?" he said finally.

"In what way?"

Kirk ran his hand through his hair, then turned and looked out the window at the bright lights of the city. "All of Starfleet was there tonight, enough brass to start a spittoon company..." He looked back over his shoulder with a half smile. "To translate, a spittoon is..."

"I am familiar with the object," said Spock as Kirk fumbled for a description.

"That hall was packed and yet Nogura was...he was..."

"Alone?" supplied Spock helpfully.

Kirk nodded. "You saw it too." He turned back to Spock. "How? Why? I can understand the loneliness of his position, every officer has to hold his distance depending on his job. As Commanding Admiral, Nogura possibly had to more than any of us, but tonight...Spock, he wasn't part of any group..." He was interrupted by a young cadet arriving with their shuttle. Unlike Spock, he missed the look of hero-worship shining from the boy's eyes.

Kirk set their course for the *Enterprise* before Spock answered him. "Jim, for the first time you are seeing Admiral Nogura as something other than the Commanding Admiral of Starfleet..."

"It's more than that, Spock."

"Yes, I know. He asked me to take care of you. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"Yeah, he still doesn't trust me out on my own."

Spock smiled slightly, then shook his head. "No, I think he's discovering something he has not let himself see for many years."

"Which is?"

"He has no one to take care of him."

"What? Spock, that's nonsense! He's got his family..."

"He has his great-grandchildren who don't know him. None of his family followed him into Starfleet, those he once served with have long since scattered. He is facing whatever future he has alone, and I would imagine he is feeling lost and possibly a little frightened."

Kirk remained silent until the *Enterprise* came into view, then he contacted the bridge. The shuttlebay doors opened and he smoothly guided the small craft to its mooring. As they waited for the bay to pressurize, he finally looked over at the Vulcan. "I'm glad we have the *Enterprise*, Spock, and each other."

"Agreed," said Spock, his gentle smile breaking Kirk's somber mood.

"Agreed," said Kirk softly. "Well, we'd better break orbit, then think about getting to bed. It's been one very long day."



An hour later Kirk and Spock left the bridge together, Spock heading for his quarters and Kirk planning to conduct his nightly tour of the ship.

"Jim, Spock, I've been trying to catch up with you for hours!" McCoy's voice came from behind them. "You coming to the party?"

"Party?" echoed Kirk.

"Well, the two of you might be the only brass on this ship that Headquarters deemed worthy to invite to the real thing, but we lowly types are holding our own celebration for the change of command. Rec Room Seventeen."

Kirk felt an unexplained weariness settle over him and looked at Spock for support, only to find him staring at the ground. "All right, Bones," he said with a sigh, "let me check up on things first."

"Great! See you later."

Kirk waited until McCoy had gone, then he turned to Spock. "The needs of the many," he started.

"Are more important than yours."

"I take it you aren't coming." Spock shook his head but offered no explanation. Kirk drew a deep breath.

"You're leaving me alone, Spock. That wasn't what Nogura asked." He watched as Spock slowly moved away, almost like a shadow blending into darkness. Suddenly a pang of emptiness that he hadn't felt for years filled him. Blindly he turned and headed off to check the ship.



Nearing the end of his tour, the doors of the turbolift opened to let him out onto the bridge. Unlike the bustling scene that had been there when the *Enterprise* had been leaving orbit, only a few crewmembers remained, and they were securing their stations, switching over systems to be manned from auxiliary control.

"Oh, sir, I didn't expect you back!"

Uhura's surprised and flustered voice caused Kirk to smile. "You may stay seated," he said softly. Uhura held her ground in the center seat as he came forward and swung the navigator's chair around, then sat down. "You'll get there, Uhura," he said, looking at the beautiful woman sitting opposite him.

She looked out at the starfield, then back at him. "I have achieved what I want, sir."

Puzzlement clouded his eyes, but he decided not to pry. "You coming to the bash McCoy's organized?"

She shook her head. "I think not."

"You live up any party," said Kirk hopefully. Uhura smiled slightly but said nothing. Finally Kirk got to his feet. "Well, I'll leave the ship in your capable hands." As he walked off the bridge, a shiver ran through him and he turned back. For a moment, everything blurred and nothing was there. Quickly trying to shake off the feeling, he ordered the turbolift to engineering.

The night personnel were working with quiet efficiency. *A command crew is unnecessary as far as these people are concerned*, thought Kirk as he walked along, noticing that none of the men here were young. *How many officers have come and gone since they first signed on, yet these are the people who keep everything humming, untouched by the changing of the rat race above them.*

"Can I help you, sir?" A man he didn't recognize had stopped beside him.

"No, just looking around. Have you seen Mr. Scott?"

"He's been gone a long time, sir."

"Oh?" Kirk was surprised. It wasn't like Scotty to leave at shift's end, even if there was a party. "Well, I'll catch up with him later." The man looked at him oddly, then nodded and walked away. Kirk watched him, a little confused by his reaction, then shook his head and left.

"Oh, Captain, coming to the gym?"

Kirk stopped in his tracks. It had been years since Sulu had called him that, and his heart felt warmed by the use of the one title he had cherished. "You not going to the party, Mr. Sulu?"

Sulu's face clouded. "Uh, no sir. I would like to but..." He looked down at the foil in his hands. "You see, uh..."

Kirk chuckled. "But you need to practice. Chekov not with you?"

"No, sir," grinned Sulu. "I've arrived at the understanding that he can't be trusted. Put an idea in his head, a weapon in his hand, and you can kiss your life goodbye."

"I know what you mean," Kirk said fervently. "Well, you're probably smart not to come. Parties are one of society's abominations. They normally serve to set people apart, not bring them together."

Sulu looked at him long and hard, then nodded and turned away.

Kirk stood for a few minutes feeling very alone. He had done everything he had set out to do, there was no longer any reason to put off attending the party. He walked back down the corridor, wishing that Spock was with him. Most of the time he enjoyed these get togethers, but attending Nogura's retirement ceremonies had shaken him a little.

"Getting older, Kirk," he said quietly. "You don't like change any more than Spock. Nogura has always been there, now he's gone. Face up to it, life is change and you have to accept it."

The growing noise told him the party was in full swing. Squaring his shoulders, he walked into the room with determination. At least Bones would be there..."



Thunderous applause broke into Kirk's daydream. He looked up in surprise to see everyone in the vast hall on their feet, all smiling at him and applauding vigorously. "What the...?"

"It's time for your speech, Admiral."

"Speech?" Kirk looked at the man beside him, a man who was familiar but whom Kirk couldn't place.

The aide smiled patiently. He had been with Kirk for many years. He had not had the privilege of knowing the Admiral when he had been in his prime, when he had been making the legends that all of Starfleet knew. He served the old man whose mind was as sharp as a computer on matters dealing with the running of Starfleet, but who somehow

lived in his own world, keeping his own company. It was obvious he had been there again, missing most of the ceremony that honored him on this the day of his retirement. He motioned to the audience. "They are waiting, Admiral."

Slowly Kirk got to his feet, his mind coming back to the reality he hated. Knowing it was useless, he still looked around for McCoy, but, like the others, he wasn't there. He walked forward and put his hands on the lectern. This was the last of the many hollow honors to come his way. "My friends," he began in a clear, strong voice.

But they were not his friends - he had none, save those few who lived in his memory. Sulu dead in a senseless accident, a saber sunk through his heart. Uhura and the *Enterprise* had died saving a galaxy, a fitting tribute to both. Scotty had always sworn he would retire and die, and he had. Gentle, compassionate McCoy had died as he had lived, trying to save lives. Spock...Spock had shown him what the sacrifice of love really was. He had never tried to replace these people, he knew he never could.

"...and so, in conclusion, I would like to thank all of you for giving up your time and coming here to honor an old man."

As the applause rose again, Kirk saw the lonely old man standing in a crowd but this time he knew it was not Nogura, but himself. Thousands had come to honor him, but even in that vast number he was facing a future alone and, like Heihachiro Nogura had so many years ago, James T. Kirk was feeling lost and more than a little frightened.



The mind can be as a distorting mirror
Allowing only the perfect memory,
Rejecting the harshness of reality.
I stand now as I have so often,
Watching perfection,
Watching you.
You are as young, vital and alive
As when first we met.
Only your luminous hazel eyes
Show how life has changed you.
We grew together,
And I learned how it felt
Not to be alone.
Your lifespan is half mine
Yet I am the one aging.
You remain perfection.
The uniform, the surroundings do not change,
Only the man within.
Each morning my eyes view the ravages of time
In the cruel mirror of reality,
But in my mind I see
Not the spectre of death that claimed you
So long ago,
But the unblemished memory of
Perfection.

